STREET & SMITH'S

Romantic Range

LASSOED LOVE

By MARIAN O'HEARN

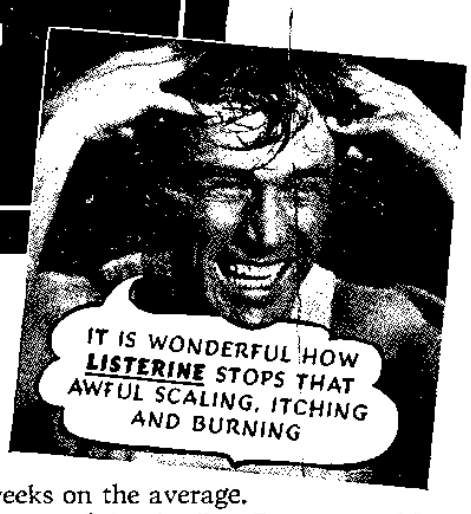
NOV. 1938

10¢

FRANK GRUBER

MARIAN O'

Thousands turn to Listerine as science proves it CURES DANDRUFF



Clinical evidence that Listerine Antiseptic kills queer Pityrosporum ovale germ, that causes dandruff, starts wave of home treatments . . . letters pour in telling of rapid, complete cures

Ever since the amazing dandruff cures accomplished with Listerine became a matter of clinical record, thousands of dandruff sufferers throughout the country have swung over to Listerine for quick, effective relief. Many of them write to us, fervently praising Listerine for what it has done for them.

Here are a few random excerpts from the hundreds of grateful letters that reach us:

"Have been using Listerine for only two weeks. Already feel wonderfully relieved from the horrible itchy feeling."

"Two weeks after first using it my dandruff was gone."

"Tried Listerine for 21 days and can find no trace of dandruff now."

"Tried everything possible, until one day I used Listerine. The itching stopped at once. My hair has stopped falling out."

Kills the Germ

In the sensational research that established the Pityrosporum ovale germ as the cause of dandruff, it was positively proved that Listerine kills the germ.

When a mid-western skin clinic instructed dandruff patients to use the daily Listerine Treatment, a substantial number obtained marked relief within the first two weeks on the average.

76% of a group of dandruff sufferers at a New Jersey Clinic, who used the Listerine treatment twice daily, showed complete disappearance of, or marked improvement in, the symptoms within thirty days.

Start Treatment Today

Don't waste time on ordinary remedies that merely wash away dandruff symptoms temporarily. Start ridding your scalp of the dandruff germ with Listerine today.

And remember, like any other germ disease, dandruff is a stubborn malady requiring persistent treatment. Even after it has been cured, it is wise to guard against re-infection by occasional Listerine Antiseptic massages at regular intervals.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY, *St. Louis, Mo.*

Cut this out

THE TREATMENT

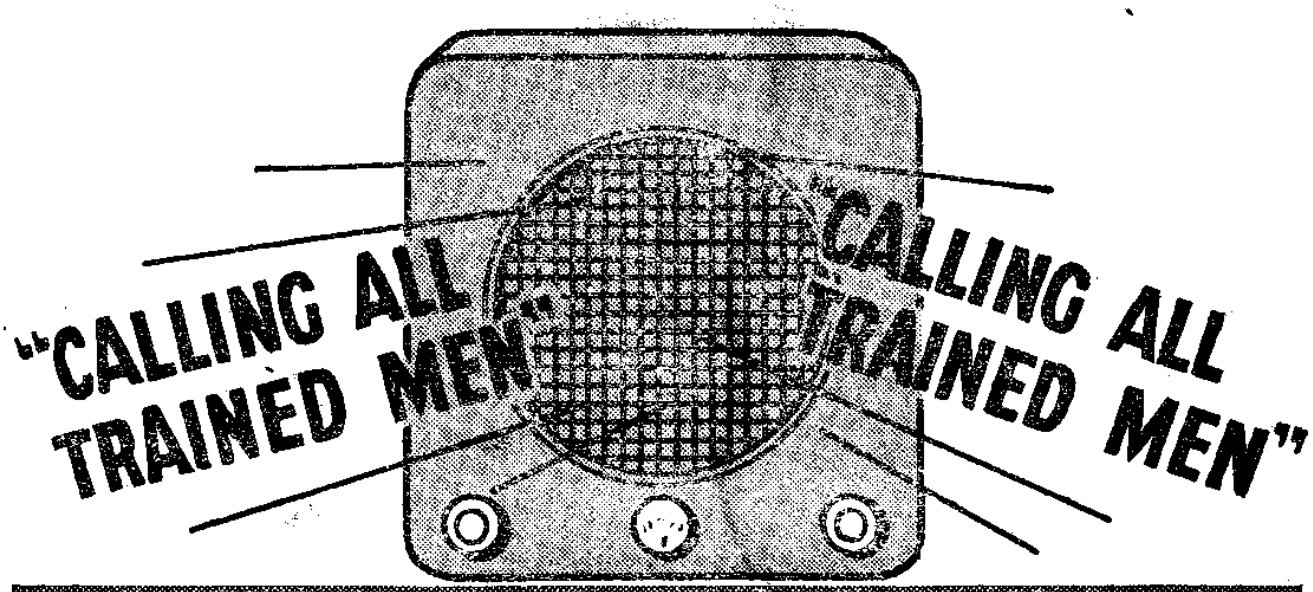
Once or twice a day, use full strength Listerine on the scalp, spreading it with fingers, or parting the hair and applying with cotton or eye dropper.

Now massage scalp vigorously and persistently with fingertips; active stimulation of the scalp is highly important in dandruff treatment.

If scalp is excessively dry, use a little olive oil in conjunction with Listerine. Listerine will not bleach the hair.

P. S. *Listerine, which has been discovered to be such an excellent germicidal treatment for dandruff, is the same Listerine Antiseptic which has been used as a mouth wash and gargle for years.*

LISTERINE the PROVED treatment for DANDRUFF



I C S

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● NOTHING can keep a man from being a success when he refuses to be anything else! Such a man recognizes the need for sound training!

If you lack training, yet are determined to succeed, the International Correspondence Schools stand ready to serve you—just as they have served hundreds of thousands of ambitious men during the past 50 years. You'll find I. C. S. texts up-to-date—I. C. S. methods proved—I. C. S. instruction personal and understanding. The coupon will bring you complete information without obligation.

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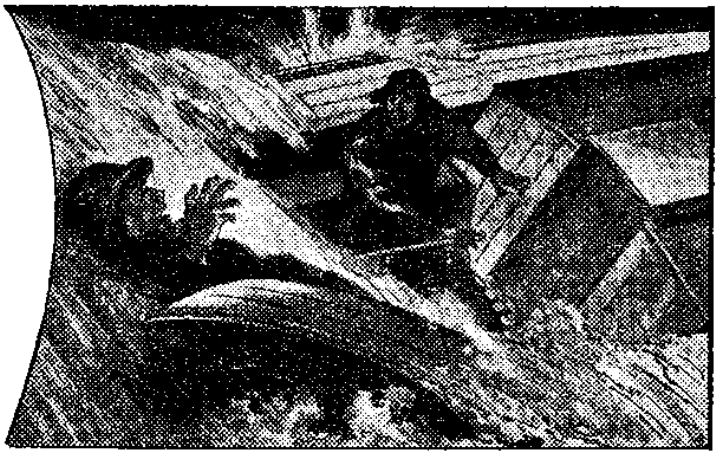
RR—1

"GOODBYE WORLD! MY SHIP FADED INTO THE NIGHT!"

OVERBOARD IN STORM, YACHTSMAN CLINGS TO CAPSIZED DORY AS SLOOP HOLDS COURSE

❶ "My 40-foot sloop was footing it up Long Island Sound like a scared cat before a stiff sou'-west breeze," writes Tom Meyer of 280 Bronxville Road, Bronxville, N. Y. "At midnight...



❷ ...off Smithtown Bay, it really began to blow. My partner, Larry Starr, was asleep below, and I gave the tiller to a friend who had done no sailing before, so I could get the dinghy in on deck before it got away from us. Then, with the darn thing half-way on board a big comber pounded over the stern, swept my feet out from under me and overboard I went, weighted down with boots and oilskins. I still clung to the dinghy, but its line had parted and my ship faded quickly into the black night!

❸ "The lad at the tiller didn't know how to bring the ship about, and although he would wake Larry, they'd be too far away to ever find me in that roaring darkness.

"I was growing numb with cold. I couldn't hang on much longer. I rolled against the gunwale of the dinghy for a fresh grip on the world that was slipping away from me. Something hard dug into my side... the flashlight in my pocket! Soaked, though it was, here was a chance!

❹ "I pressed the switch. A finger of light stabbed through the storm. Time dragged on as I played the light about me. I cursed my shipmates. 'Why can't the fools see my light?' and then...the beam caught the white sail! I screamed for joy. An arm waved encouragement. Minutes later, thanks to those *fresh* DATED 'Eveready' batteries that kept working under the toughest conditions imaginable, I was warm and happy in my own bunk on my own ship, our Block Island cruise resumed.

(Signed) Tom Meyer"

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Romantic Range

The HEART OF THE WEST

NOVEMBER, 1938 VOL. VII NO. 1

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A GRIPPING NOVEL OF FRONTIER LOVE AND COURAGE

"SUSAN GOES WEST"

By MARIAN O'HEARN

COMING NEXT MONTH

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GRAPEVINE WHISPERS

Every now and then we hear a story that brightens our whole day. Such is Marian O'Hearn's (you remember her as author of "Beyond The Trail," "Running Horse Valley," etc.) yarn of rivalry between two local newspapers in the town of Laramie. It all happened when she was working on "The Boomerang," and that paper was receiving strong opposition from a sheet called "The Republican."

It was Miss O'Hearn's assignment to get a story on "the fastest horse in Wyoming." So pencil and paper in hand, she hot-footed it to the appointed place. There, much to her surprise, the owner of "the fastest horse in Wyoming," had waiting for her a saddled range pony. Not letting the fact that she had never been on anything faster than a carousel daunt her, Miss O'Hearn proceeded to mount.

To this day she doesn't know what happened. All she remembers is that the mare got started, and within one minute, "the fastest horse in Wyoming" was just a speck in the distance and O'H. was headed for Laramie. To Laramie, through Laramie, and past Laramie, she stuck it out. And finally, on the outskirts of the town, she and the mare parted company—violently! Fortunately, Lochinvar, on "the fastest horse in Wyoming," came plodding along and rushed O'H. to the doctor on his gallant steed.

Twenty-four hours later, Miss O'Hearn, with a sweet but martyred expression on her face, dragged herself to "The Boomerang"—only to be greeted with stony silence. Accusingly, the editor pointed to a copy of "The Republican" which had just appeared on the street. There, on the front page, was an amazingly accurate story of O'H.'s misadventure. And —as she was colorfully if vehemently reminded—she had not sent one word of it to her own paper!

Speaking of newspaper stories, James B. McLean (author of "Snowbound Stranger") tells us of how, sick to death of the bellowing of cattle, the ailments and the smell of cattle, he decided to leave his native West and seek greener fields of excitement.

With luck on his side, in a short space of time he managed to land on a newspaper, and shortly thereafter was assigned to cover a story in Uruguay. "This," said James B. McLean to James B. McLean, "is the chance I've been waiting for: new faces, new places, adventures—and no cattle."

Upon arriving in Uruguay, the office assigned him to the city of Montivideo. And so our trusty McLean set forth, jubilantly, for the greener fields. All through the journey to Montivideo, McLean mulled over and over the prospects of the town: how different it would be; what the people would be like; what the customs would be like.

Finally, the journey was at an end. J. B. expectfully and hopefully disembarked—to find himself in the middle of a two-thousand-head cattle drive through the city of Montivideo.

We are looking forward, with great anticipation, to the arrival of the rodeo. It is always such a pleasant feeling to renew acquaintances—even if for too short a time. But there is that sense of well-being that comes with the sight of old friends—especially when they bring with them a little touch of the West.

Next month Dabney Otis Collins will contribute "Wheels Over Texas"—a particularly fast moving story of a Southern family who begin life all over again in the West. You'll live through their adventures, their romances and heartbreaks, so colorfully portrayed under the flowing pen of Mr. Collins.

The other evening, as we witnessed the screening of *The Texans*, we were forcibly reminded that we take too much for granted. It takes a picture like that, sometimes, to make remember that the West is the glorious part of this country it is because of the hardships and sorrow those plucky pioneers endured; because of the untold sacrifices our forefathers suffered. And to them, therefore, we give voice to what is in our mind today and always in our heart—a deep and everlasting gratitude!

I jumped from $18 a week to $50 -- a Free Book started me toward this GOOD PAY IN RADIO

HERE'S How it Happened

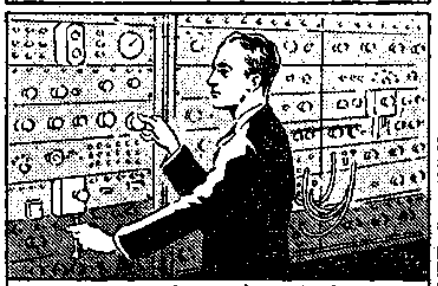
by S. J. E.

(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

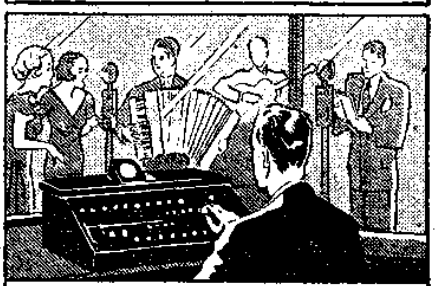
"I had an $18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them."

"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make $5, $10, $15 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."

"When I finished training I accepted a job as serviceman with a Radio store. In three weeks I was made service manager at more than twice what I earned in the shoe factory."



"Eight months later N.R.I. Employment Department sent me to Station KWCR as a Radio operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUI. I am also connected with Television Station W9XK."



"N.R.I. Training took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay. Radio is growing fast. The field is wide open to properly trained men."

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Many Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Do you too want a better job? Do you too want to make more money? Radio offers many spare time and full time opportunities for good pay.

Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time repair jobs pay many $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to $6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems, offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets showing how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and ideas that made good spare time money—$200 to $500 a year—for hundreds.

I send Special Radio Equipment to conduct experiments, build circuits, get practical experience. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT TO HELP FIX SETS QUICKER —SAVE TIME, MAKE MORE MONEY.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my Training in Radio and Television; shows 131 letters from men I trained, shows what they are doing, earning; shows my Money Back Agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on penny post card—NOW!

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President,
Dept. 8KD
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D. C.

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Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out spare time and full time opportunities in Radio, and explains your practical method of training at home in spare time to become a Radio Expert. (Please write plainly.)

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A stirring Novelette

by Dabney Otis Collins

Sod House Sweetheart

GATHERING the buffalo's bones into a white heap, Karen thought: "That's two or three more dollars towards sending mother back home."

She looked across the wind-rippled ocean of prairie to a wagon crawling through the waves of brown grass. She lifted an arm, and her father headed the team toward her.

Karen went on hunting for buffalo bones.

It had come to this. For three years there had been no crops. What the drouth spared, the grasshoppers

destroyed. The land of plenty, that she had known when her family moved West from Pennsylvania, was no more. Fields of wheat and corn shriveled beneath the torrid sun. No thread of water broke the white glare of the streams' bottoms. The garden patches about the windmills—the only oases in this desert of despair—were shredded of leaves by ravenous hordes of grasshoppers—— Now she, like thousands of other homesteaders, was forced to gather buffalo bones.

As she strode through the crackling grass, her clear blue gaze kept lifting to the south. And a wistful smile would curve her lips. Always, day after day, she looked southward. Each time that she saw a trail herd, moving like a giant serpent out of the gray distance, her heartbeat would quicken, and she would think, "It is he."

Spring had lengthened into summer, but Webb Dalhart had not yet come north. Or, if he had, he had passed her by. Karen could not believe this. He had promised, last year, to see her in the spring. He would come. She drew her gaze from the heat-layered distance and went to join her father at the wagon.

She wore a blue-checked calico dress, its full-pleated skirt flowing from a waist so small it might be spanned by a man's hands. A ruffled bonnet of the same faded blue was thrown back from her straight forehead, showing light blond hair parted in the middle. There was quiet strength in the mold of this girl's body. About her there was a quality of sweetness, born of doing unto others.

Chris Nielsen stopped the wagon beside the pile of bones and began to throw them into the empty box. Karen helped. The old man's hard eyes restlessly searched the grass hummocks. Muttering, "You ain't tendin' to business, Karen," he moved to a clump of yucca and lifted a heavy thigh bone. "You might 'a' known this warn't a three-legged buffalo. Here's at least twenty cents you was throwin' away."

Money, she thought bitterly. Must all happiness—life itself—be measured in terms of money? Worry over the lack of it had made an old man of Chris, long before his time. It had warped his thinking and soured his soul.

"Trouble with you," grumbled Chris as he drove toward a buffalo wallow, "you're goin' 'round with your head in the clouds. Looks like you don't know we won't raise enough to carry us through the winter."

Karen made no answer to this. She had heard it all so many times.

"What you figger we gonna do when the bones give out?" Chris Nielsen's face grew hard and bitter under its gray stubble. "Theron Blade ain't goin' to wait forever," he said.

"I don't love Theron," she said gently.

"Love! What good's that, when you ain't got enough to eat? Can't eat love," he scoffed. "An' your ma——" He swore at the ribby team. "Good Lord, Karen. Here's a man like Theron Blade runnin' after you, an' givin' Jon a good job an'——"

"I don't know about Jon," Karen interrupted. Jon was her brother, two years her junior.

"Well, I do. He's workin' in Theron's store, ain't he?" Chris paused. "What you mean?" he asked, a thin trace of uneasiness in the question.

"You hear the same things I do, dad. About his drinking and gambling. I wish he was home with us."

"Jon's in good hands. Theron will make a big man outa him, you watch an' see. Trouble with you, you got your head set on that Texan. Well, I'm tellin' you right now, you ain't marryin' no cowman."

Karen stepped from the moving wagon. So often she had listened to this talk. The black days, the hopeless future, had changed Chris utterly from the man he had been. She looked to the south, and the dreamy smile lay again on her mouth. Some day her prince would come.

But if he did not—— She seemed to see herself in Theron Blade's big white house in Empire City—and there were bars across the windows, and the walls were of stone. There was no warmth in this house; it was a tomb, and she was buried alive.

THERE were no buffalo skeletons in the wallow. Karen waded through the brittle grama grass, musing on how quickly buffaloes had been swept from the plains. As a girl, she had stood at the kitchen window and seen them passing all day long. A vast sea of shaggy humps, whose tread was like ceaseless thunder, shaking the jars on the pantry shelves. Now their bones were being scoured from the prairie that, since the dawn of history, had been their home.

Quick beat of hoofs drew her attention to a rider racing toward the wagon. A second rider dipped over a ridge; swiftly the gap closed between them. The rider in front raised his arm, as though in desperate appeal. His cry reached her, thin and shrill:

"Help!"

Karen chilled. That was Jon! She beckoned frantically to Chris, running to meet the wagon.

"Ain't that Jon?" he shouted, pulling in the team.

"Yes!" Karen climbed to the seat. "Hurry, dad!"

The horses lunged forward, the wheels spun over the grass. Gripping the rail of the jolting seat, Karen saw the rear rider swinging his rope.

"Git up—git up!" Chris brought his whip down on the backs of the running horses.

The loop's flattened circle shot from the hand of that rider. To the tense girl, it appeared not to move. Jon lifted from the saddle, shooting backward through the air.

"By Jupiter!" yelled Chris. "Ef I only had my gun!"

"Faster, dad. He's getting down to kill Jon!"

The team could go no faster. The men were down in the grass now. Fear for her brother held Karen rigid to the seat. She, too, wished she had a gun. The other man stood up. Karen stared, unable to believe the truth. The man was Webb Dalhart.

Springing from the wagon before it stopped, Chris ran to the tall Texan. "You killed my boy!" he screamed hoarsely. "I'll——" He dropped to his knees beside the still figure in the grass.

Karen moved slowly toward Webb Dalhart, as he did toward her. Amazement stamped his tanned, flat-boned face, and keen regret darkened his eyes. Words would not come to Karen. Some of the tension went out of her, as Jon sat up, rubbing a shoulder.

Dalhart said, "I thought he was somebody else."

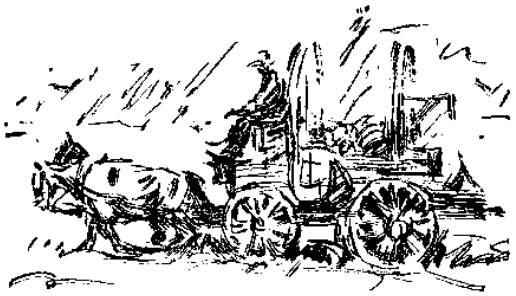
Karen went past him, and she felt as though broken dreams trailed her. "Jon, what——"

"I'm all right, sis." The boy, so much like her, showed her a quick smile. "Got the wind knocked out of me."

Chris Nielsen faced Dalhart angrily. "I wanter know what's the meanin' of this. Jon's keepin' somethin' hid. What you doin' chasin' him?" he demanded.

Never would Karen forget the mute anxiety in the boy's face, as he awaited Dalhart's answer.

"My herd was stampeded in the breaks of the Cimarron this mornin'," Dalhart explained. "The thieves run about eighty head off into the Nations. My boys follered, but they got away. Comin' back, I saw the kid, here, and took out after him." A smile pulled at his long lips. "I reckon he thought I was a robber, the same as I thought him one."



"I did, for a fact," Jon said quickly.

Chris was not quite satisfied. "What was you doin' on the Cimarron? I thought you was clerkin' in Theron Blade's store?"

"I am, dad. Theron sent me to shoot him a deer." Jon grinned. "I lost the deer and my rifle, both, when this feller got after me. All I could think about was gettin' home."

"Lucky you warn't kilt," Chris growled. His look at Dalhart held no friendliness. "Next time, be keerful who you rope off his horse. You may be a cowman, but you don't own the whole world."

"Long ways from it," Dalhart said quietly.

"Yeh, but you act like you do. All you damn Texans. You come up here drivin' your cussed longhorns over other folks' land, cuttin' their fences, usin' up their water." The old man's face became rock-hard. "Better keep 'em offa me. I'm givin' you fair warnin'."

WEBB DALHART did not say anything, and Chris started to the wagon. "You go on home, Jon, an' tend to that shoulder. Be keerful not to get your ma stirred up. Karen —come on." He waited, scowling.

Dalhart asked softly, "How are things, Karen?"

"All right. Grasshoppers, of course. And no rain since March." She lowered her voice. "Webb, tell me the truth about Jon."

"'Hoppers, a-plenty," he said. "I rode across what was left of a cornfield, back there. 'Hoppers filled the furrows, level. How you goin' to farm a country like that?"

"Was Jon one of those robbers?"

He knew that, between this girl and him, there must always be truth. "He was one of them, Karen. But I wouldn't worry. Jon's only a kid. He'll straighten out."

"I've heard of this happening to other herds."

He answered reluctantly, "Seems to be a regular gang of them. You hear tales of this wild bunch, all up and down the Trail. But I wouldn't worry——"

"Karen! Come on!" Chris called from the wagon.

She started away, and Webb walked beside her leading his horse. The solid strength of him flowed into her, soothing her troubled spirit.

"I've thought about you a million times," Dalhart said. "When it come time to go up-trail I couldn't sleep, thinkin' about you. Did you miss me, Karen?"

Her answer lay plain in her eyes. "I waited so long, Webb."

"When I get back from Dodge, I'm goin' to ask you something."

Unconsciously, her step quickened.

"You won't have to keep on gatherin' buffalo bones, and fightin' 'hoppers. I'll take you away from all this, down on the Rio Grande. What's the matter? You're cryin'."

Karen was thinking of her sick mother, of Jon, of her hard-driven father. This sense of loyalty to her family formed the pattern of her life. It had guided her throughout her nineteen years. She said, not looking at him, "You're late this year."

"Had a hard time gettin' a herd together. Cattle aren't as plentiful as they used to be." He went on with her to the wagon.

As Chris drove homeward, he did not conceal his dislike for the Texan riding opposite Karen. And when the sod house came into view, and they saw a red-wheeled democrat buggy hitched in front of it, Chris said loudly to Karen:

"Well, there's Theron Blade, come to see you."

Dalhart grinned. "Meanin' three's a crowd? Well, I think I'll take a look at this Blade hombre I hear so much about. You don't mind, Karen?"

She shook her head, feeling the hot stain in her cheeks.

"I mind," Chris said shortly. "I got no use for cowmen—specially one that tries to murder my son. They ain't our kind of folks."

"Dad," the girl said quietly. She looked at Dalhart, and he was not smiling now.

THERON BLADE was waiting at the small pile of bones beside the barn. He was a small man, dark and wiry. He had a wedge-shaped face, and the eyes under his broad brow were of a yellowish cast. Looking at Webb Dalhart, those eyes darkened, as though a tiny shade were drawn over them. Then he was saying in his easy manner: "Howdy, Chris. And how is my little bone pilgrim today?"

Karen said: "I want you to meet Webb Dalhart, Mr. Blade." The men nodded briefly, their faces betraying no expression.

"Dalhart's on his way to Dodge with a trail herd," Chris said, scowling at Dalhart. He got down from the wagon. "You two go on in the house where it's cool. I don't need no help."

Webb gathered his reins. "So long, Karen," he said. His eyes held Theron Blade's in cold, level gaze. He smiled a little as he said, "See you again, Blade."

Something in the way he said this, caused Karen to look quickly at him. Dalhart was still smiling. But there was no smile on Theron Blade's sharp-pointed face. His eyes were dark and tawny, and his lips pressed together like the jaws of a vise.

Blade walked beside her toward the three-room sod house that lifted its squat ugliness from the burned-out earth. Gusts of grasshoppers arose at each step, and the sun was like a hot branding iron on the backs of her hands.

"Each time I see you, you grow more beautiful," Theron Blade complimented her. "You're like one of these pure, fresh prairie flowers."

"That the grasshoppers have chewed ragged?" She went on, seriously, "I'm worried about Jon. He belongs to that band of robbers we've been hearing about."

"Jon? Who told you such a thing?"

"Webb Dalhart." She repeated what he had said.

"I don't believe a word of it," said Theron Blade. "Why should you believe this Dalhart? Who is he?" He eyed her with a searching atten-

tion. "I'll look after Jon. I want to look after you, too," he added softly.

A woman's plaintive moan drifted from the soddy, ending in a wailing cry: "Oh—won't the wind ever stop blowin'?"

Karen's step quickened.

"You need me, Karen. All I have will be yours, and your family's." He took her hand within his. "We'll go for a ride after it cools off. I've got something to ask you."

Karen withdrew the hand that had suddenly turned cold. She felt the heavy chains tightening on her, crushing her. As she went into the house, she looked toward the figure of Webb Dalhart, going away from her.

KAREN strode through the parched grass, searching for buffalo bones. With the increasing number of bone-hunters, the reward had become less and less. Half of this day had passed, and the wagon was still empty. Chris motioned to her, and she went to the wagon. They drove farther west across the sun-drenched prairie.

Chris broke his silence of the past two hours. "Well," he said, looking straight ahead, "you can be satisfied now. The bank wouldn't give me any more time on my note."

"They're going to sell us out?"

"August."

The brown prairie slid slowly past the wagon. There was no sound except the rattle of the clevis chain, the crunching of dried stems under the wheels.

Chris Nielsen said bitterly, "Not another gal in the State of Kansas wouldn't jump at Theron Blade. But you. Oh, no. He ain't good enough for you. You're stuck on a Texas man."

Parental obedience was a ruling force in Karen's life. She broke that rule now. "I won't be sold to any man," she declared.

The skin of Chris' cheeks tightened under their white stubble. "Who said anything about sellin' you?" he demanded. "I'm jest tryin' to save you from the hell yore ma had to go through. Tryin' to make things easier for you, than she ever had it. Talkin' that way to yore own father——" He jerked his angry gaze from her. "Ef she could hear you talkin' like that, she'd quit fightin'. Might as well quit, anyhow," he added, to himself.

But Karen heard. She looked out over the rolling sweep of burned-out grassland, seeing only her mother growing paler, thinner each day; hearing her piteous pleas for the wind to stop blowing. Somehow, Theron Blade's big white house in Empire City did not now seem to be a tomb. A broad road seemed to lead right to it, and she was walking up that road.

A wagon, drawn by a pair of mules, crawled across the brown emptiness. Even at this distance, she saw the white gleam of bones piled high in the box. The driver was coming to meet them. He lifted an arm, as though in recognition. Drawing nearer, Karen smiled.

It was the old buffalo hunter, "Blackfoot" Smith. Never would she forget the night he had staggered into their sod house, his eyes bright with fever, the left leg of his buckskin breeches caked with blood. He had been gored by a buffalo bull.

That was years ago, before her mother minded the wind. Her mother's hands had cleansed and sewed up the terrible gash; she had nursed Blackfoot back to health. In gratitude, he had kept them in buffalo meat until there were no more buffaloes.

"I've thought about you a million times——"

"HIYUH!" he greeted, teeth showing strongly through the black beard that matted his face to the eyes. "Long time no see."

"'Pears like you found all the bones," Chris grumbled.

Blackfoot chuckled. "Trust this ol' coon to know whar the bones is at. I laid 'em thar, didn't I? Lordy, to think them days is gone over the hill that quick! Why, it seems like yesterday when me an' ol' Betsy"—affectionately touching the Sharps rifle propped on the seat beside him—"useter be trailin' the buffler. Now, thar's only the bones. Soon, they'll be gone."

"They're gone now, from round here," Chris said.

"Wal, I reck'n." The barrel-chested, hickory-tough plainsman, who had hunted with Kit Carson and trapped with Bridger, who had scouted for Fremont and was member of half a dozen Indian tribes, looked slyly at Karen. "I ain't brung you no present in a long time, Karen. Come hyar."

"What is it, Blackfoot? You've got me curious." She came over to his wagon.

Blackfoot Smith was digging in a pocket of his patched and faded Army shirt. "'Tain't no fofurraw to make you purty," he said. "The Lord done already took keer o' that." He held out to her a necklace of perfectly matched tourquoise threaded with tiny links of silver. "A Mex down in Santy Fee give 'em to me fur l'arnin' him how to play poker. Like 'em?"

Karen took the necklace wonderingly into her hands. "They're too beautiful," she murmured.

"Wagh! I wish they wuz diamonds." He lowered his voice. "I seen Webb, up in Dodge."

"Webb Dalhart? You know him?"

"Shucks. I've knowed Webb since afore he was dry behind the ears. His pa an' me useter run cows together, afore the War. We fit in the same comp'ny, under Gen'l Johnston. Only diffe'nce, Webb's pa never come back." Blackfoot paused. "Webb told me about you."

Karen smiled. "What did he say?"

Blackfoot Smith gathered his lines. "Ask him, next time you see him. An', say. Ef you want some buffler bones, foller my back trail." He started the mules in motion.

Karen slipped the necklace over her head, smiling in a dreamy way.

"Well?" Chris asked sharply. "That old fox tell you anything?"

"He said to follow his tracks."

"Humph. Well, come on. Don't stand there with that glassy look in yore eyes. Better hide them beads, too, before the feller Blackfoot stole 'em from comes up an' jerks 'em offn yore neck."

Karen laughed, the first time in many months.

THE WHEEL imprints led them in a southwesterly direction for perhaps five miles, into a draw held between steep cutbanks. Blue stem reached to the wagon's hubs.

"Look!" exclaimed Chris, rising to his feet. "Somebody's beat us here!"

It was true. A large pile of bones rose from the lower end of the draw. A man moved toward the pile, bent under part of a skeleton.

Chris groaned. "I might 'a' knowed it. That's always the way."

Karen was leaning forward in the seat. "Why—that's Webb!"

Chris squinted at the long-backed, wide-shouldered figure with attention that shut out all else. He cracked his whip, and the horses hit into a lope. "I told that feller to keep away from here. What's he doin here, takin' our bones?"

"But there may be plenty for us

both. Webb is a friend of Blackfoot's. He told Webb."

"Don't care what he told him. I got no use for Texas men. They run their cattle over us, then come back to haul off our buffalo bones. An' what about him tryin' to kill Jon?" The wagon wheels swished through the tall grass. Chris stood up. "Hey, you! These here bones are for them that needs 'em. Go on back to Texas where you belong!" He stopped the wagon beside the stack of bleached bones.

Dalhart looked only at Karen. "How you been?" he asked, but his eyes spoke a more tender message.

"All right, Webb. Blackfoot said he saw you in Dodge."

"That old wart hog." Dalhart was looking at the turquoise necklace. "I wondered what became of that. I bought it for you in Dodge, to bring to you."

They laughed.

Chris said gruffly, "We got too many bone-hunters round here now. Us farmers need the money, to keep from starvin'. You don't need 'em."

"The bones are yours," Dalhart said. "I told Blackfoot to tell you I was diggin' you up a load. He was blowin' about how he downed sixty-five buffalo in a single stand. We came down here together." He pointed to a skeleton showing through the tall grass. "From the looks of it, Blackfoot told the truth, for once."

"You mean you don't want 'em?"

Dalhart nodded.

"All right, I'll take 'em." Chris got down from the wagon. He said to Dalhart: "Let's get this straight. If you think you can buy my daughter with a bunch of buffalo bones ——" Some lightning change in Dalhart's face stopped him. "Well, you know what I mean."

"Dad!" Karen's cheeks were flaming.

Dalhart said quietly, "Want me to help you load?"

"Don't need no help," was the short answer. A thigh bone arced over the wagon side, stuck bottom hollowly. "Karen!" he called.

But she went on with Webb Dalhart toward his horse. "Dad didn't use to be this way," she apologized. "I remember when he used to laugh, even play with Jon and me. It's the hard times. He can't think of anything but drouth and grasshoppers and debts. But I can thank you, Webb."

He looked at her with deep understanding. "I know how it is. He isn't the first man that's been beaten by free land. It's the same way, from Texas to Montana. When the bones are gone, what then?"

"It's got to rain, some time."

"It never will rain enough to make this farmin' country. I'm takin' you back to Texas with me, Karen."

"No, Webb. Not now." She could not conceal her love for this man; she did not try. "I've got to stay here, with my family. They need me. Some day——" Her voice died away.

"I love you, honey," he whispered, and his arms curved around her. Tenderly he kissed her, and reality dropped from the lonely girl. She seemed to stand on the threshold of a new and beautiful world, and everywhere was song and joy.

"I love you, Webb," she murmured, clinging to him.

"Sweetheart. You'll go with me?"

She came slowly out of his big arms. "There'll be a way. Tell me. Does the wind blow down there, all the time?"

He knew what she was thinking. "No, Karen." He kissed her again. "See you tonight."

"I'll be waiting."

AS SHE WENT back to the wagon, Karen moved as though in a cloud of transcendant beauty, floating high above the earth. In this fairy world there was no Theron Blade.

Chris stood beside the partly filled wagon, a belligerent droop to his shoulders. His eyes were like bits of ice, his beard-stubbled mouth a bitter line. "So that's the kind of a darter I've raised," he said, with a biting harshness.

Karen smiled happily. Nothing could touch her now.

"Lettin' that cowman hug you an' kiss you, right before my very eyes! Even if you ain't got no respect for yoreself, you orter have some for me."

"He's wonderful, dad." The words sang from her.

"Wonderful, is he? Ain't he a Texas man!" Chris rasped. "The breed that's fightin' us fool hoemen, as he calls us, tooth an' toenail! They cut our fences, run over our crops, an' laugh in our faces, damn 'em! An' you—my own flesh an' blood—done went over to their side."

"I love him," she said simply. "It wouldn't make any difference if he was Jesse James. I'd still love him."

The old man eyed her in a long silence, as though seeing her in some light that changed her. His expression was that of a person who has come to an unexpected and impassable barrier. He asked, in a baffled way, "What'll Theron say?"

"He'll understand. You see how it is, don't you, dad?"

He lifted a gnarled hand and rested it on her shoulder. The unaccustomed show of affection misted the girl's eyes. "Shore, I do," her father said. "Me an' yore ma was the same way, once on a time. Nothin' could 'a' stopped us, neither." He looked away. "But a man gets old an' tired, an' he lets some things get away from him."

Karen had not kissed her father since she could remember. She did it now. "I knew you'd be big and fine about it. And don't worry about the bank. With all these bones, and the price we're getting, we can meet the note. And have enough left over to send mama back home."

Chris nodded. "It does look like things are turnin'."

"Turning?" She laughed gaily. "They've turned clear around."

EACH driving a wagonload of bones, Karen and Chris entered Empire City. From the depot, on either side of the track, solid ricks of bones extended for an eighth of a mile. The top of the heap showed above the box cars. Thousands and thousands of tons of bones, and not enough cars to haul them away.

Karen drove her wagon onto the platform scales. Jared Wolfgang, the bone buyer, entered the weight in his journal. "Price ain't quite as good as last time," he said.

Chris overheard the remark. "What's that?"

"Price is down, Nielsen. Best I can offer is five dollars."

Karen saw the despair in her father's face. "Five dollars! We been gettin' eight an' nine."

Jared Wolfgang gestured toward the huge white ricks. "Too many

bones. Same thing happened to buffalo hides, when they got too plentiful. And beaver. Five dollars a ton might seem a high price to you, a month from now."

"It's all we can do, dad." Karen drove off the scales.

"That's always the way," Chris complained bitterly. "When you got somethin' to sell, nobody wants it. But when you have to buy—that's a horse of another color."

Jared Wolfgang nodded. "That hits the nail square on the head."

It did not occur to Chris that Wolfgang might be making his own prices. He was a tall, narrow man, slightly stooped. He had a way of looking from a corner of his eyes at a person he was talking to. Wolfgang had been a hide buyer and an Indian trader. Whenever his name was mentioned in the presence of Blackfoot Smith, the old hunter always fell silent.

Karen drove thoughtfully toward the track. This was how it had always been with them. The big wheat year, when Chris had threshed an average of thirty bushels from each of his acres, wheat dropped to twenty-five cents a bushel. Next year, wheat rose above a dollar a bushel, but they had none to sell. So it had been, since she could remember.

Webb Dalhart's deep voice lifted above the grind of the wheels. "I've been lookin' for you." His big shape passed the wagon box, and he stepped upon the double-tree, swinging easily to the seat. The reins passed from her hands to his, the touch warming her strangely. "You won't have to be haulin' bones much longer."

"We can wait, Webb."

"I want to help," he said gently. "It ain't right for you to shoulder the whole load." He stopped the team and began to unload. Karen stood in the shadow of the bone heap, that resembled a ragged snowdrift. She was looking through the quivering heat toward an approaching wagon.

"It's Blackfoot," she said.

Dalhart glanced up. "He left town last night, claimin' he was goin' down on the Cimarron to another one of his big stands. He got a load, already?"

"The wagon looks empty."

THE WAGON was not empty, they saw as Blackfoot Smith halted beside them. Two dead men were in it, wrapped in blankets. "Bar 7 boys," Blackfoot explained. "The outfit wuz stampeded in the river breaks last night. These hyar poor devils wanted to be sent home. I told the trail boss I'd fetch 'em in."

Karen and Dalhart exchanged a swift look. "Jon's over in Blade's store," he said. His tone changed. "Did the Bar 7 down any of 'em, Blackfoot?"

"Nary a one. The coyotes jumped 'em whiles they wuz eatin' supper. They had a bunch of them critters in the breaks afore the Bar 7 boys could git to their hosses." He looked down at the blanketed figures. "These hyar is the wrangler kid an' one of the guards. They kept sayin' they wanted to go home."

Dalhart turned away, but not before Karen saw the tightening of his face muscles.

"An' they call Injuns savages," muttered Blackfoot, driving on.

Dalhart emptied the wagon and drove back to the scales. They passed Chris, who was unloading farther up the track. Theron Blade stood talking with Jared Wolfgang, near the scales. Blade was emphasizing some point by pumping a forefinger against the bone buyer's

She dropped beside him, moaning, "Webb—Webb!"

checkered waistcoat. He looked up, seeing Karen and Webb Dalhart. The quick change in Theron Blade's expression astonished the girl. Hate drenched the wedge of his face, and his lips drew together like a vise.

The wheels came to rest on the platform.

Wolfgang said to Dalhart: "Unload, if you don't want her to be cheated out of whatever you weigh."

Dalhart came leisurely over the wheel. His look at Wolfgang was level and cold. "It wouldn't be the first time you've cheated."

A stillness gripped Wolfgang's narrow face. "Men have been hurt for sayin' things like that," he said. "Even Texas men."

Karen said, "Webb, please."

"You beat down the price to five dollars," Dalhart accused Wolfgang, a closely held temper running through the speech. "Who knows

you ain't puttin' the other three dollars in your pocket?"

Theron Blade spoke sharply, "What business is it of yours?"

"I'm makin' it my business, Blade. You got anything to say about it?"

"Maybe I have. But I'm not in the habit of making my talk in front of a lady." Lifting a narrow glance to Karen, he turned and went to the station.

Wolfgang entered the wagon's weight in his journal, wrote a receipt, and handed it to Karen. He did not look at the cowboy.

"They're payin' eight and a half in Dodge," Dalhart said. "How come?"

"Can't help what they pay in Dodge, or anywhere else," snapped Wolfgang. "I have to pay what my company offers."

"Who's the company—you and Theron Blade?"

A spasm of rage wrenched the lower part of Wolfgang's face. "Damn a big-mouthed Texan!" he said, lifting a weight quickly from the scale's beam. Leaping the six feet between them, Dalhart struck down the drawn-back arm. He wrenched the heavy iron cylinder out of Wolfgang's hand, sent him spinning backward. Wolfgang struck the scale box, sliding to the shaking platform. Dalhart climbed to the seat and took the reins. Looking back, Karen saw Jared Wolfgang still sitting there. He was looking down between his long legs, as if deep in thought.

"I DON'T know, Webb," Karen said.

He pulled down the brim of his hat, his lips shaping a tough smile. "I took a long shot, corrallin' those two together. But I may not be so far off the trail."

"Webb!" Karen was shocked, and showed it. "Theron Blade, a thief! I don't know anything about this Wolfgang. He may be cheating, as you say. But Theron Blade—well, I wish you wouldn't speak of him that way."

Dalhart did not say anything, and she went on:

"Everybody around here thinks well of Theron. He built Empire City, you know, from the very ground. See the church, over there? He built it last year. Paid for it all, himself."

"I see," was all Dalhart said.

The wagon rolled through the main street of the prairie town, plumes of dust sliding from the broad tires. They passed the livery stable, the blacksmith shop beside it, the old stage station. Across the street towered the four-story hotel, with its upper and lower galleries, its many windows throwing back the sun's glare. Farther along, Blackfoot Smith's wagon waited before Blade's general merchandise store, a group of men standing near.

Those men scattered, as leaves before a gust of wind, leaving two of their number locked in straining attitude. The fighters broke apart, their fists flashing white in the sunlight.

"That's Jon!" murmured Karen. "Webb, hurry!" As she spoke, the boy went down under the hurled weight of his opponent.

Dalhart said: "That's one of my boys, Chuck Wayman." He struck the dust before the wagon stopped. He bent over the struggling figures, and Karen saw his arms spread apart. When he came up, he brought Jon and Chuck Wayman with him, one in each hand. He whirled them backward, away from each other.

"How come you didn't let 'em finish, Webb?" demanded Blackfoot.

"Yeah." Chuck Wayman came

forward, pulling the back of his hand across his bleeding mouth. "You know who he is?" he yelled at Webb. "He's one of that gang that jumped us on the Cimarron. I seen him, close-up. The same bunch that done that!" he cried, pointing to the figures in Blackfoot's wagon.

"It's a lie," Jon denied, his voice thin and shaky. But Karen knew it was no lie.

"Jon," she said, "come home with me."

It appeared, for a moment, that he would. Then Theron Blade came striding across the street, and the kid said stiffly, "I can take care of myself."

Theron Blade stopped before Dalhart. "Stirring up more trouble?" he said quietly. "We have our own law in Empire City. We don't need any help from Texans."

Dalhart measured him with a slow glance. "Miss Nielsen is trustin' you to take good care of her brother."

"Why, Webb, he is," Karen said quickly. "Don't blame him for Jon's mistakes."

"Oh, leave me alone," Jon muttered, and went into the store.

A smile touched Theron Blade's lips, in striking contrast to the hate that glittered from his eyes. He turned to Karen and said: "I'm taking care of Jon. Don't worry."

"I know, Theron."

All the way home, she thought of the black and bitter hatred that lay between Theron Blade and Webb Dalhart. It haunted her.

HER CHAIR tilted against the sod wall, Karen sat outside the house. The sky was a black vault pierced with star glitter, and the level darkness flowed to the unseen horizon. Night had brought little relief from the heat. A dry, hot wind sighed over the parched earth, rattling the bones of the dead grass.

"The wind! If it would only stop blowin'!" Her mother's voice was a thin moan, sinking into the deeper tones of the wind.

Karen got up and sat beside her mother's bed, and held the moist, bony hand. It was at such times, when hope ran low in her, that her thoughts would turn to Theron Blade, as birds over a storm-tossed sea fly to a haven. When her mother was sleeping, she went softly out into the stagnant night. Chris sat in the door in his sock-feet, sucking the stem of his pipe as a man does when he has no tobacco.

"I don't know," he said, despair dyeing the simple words.

Karen let the silence run on. Lighted soddy windows glowed low against the curtain of blackness. A coyote's shrill bark sank without echo into the void. Wind sighed across the heated breast of the earth —always wind. It had not been so very long ago, on still nights like this in the spring, when Karen had heard the buffaloes going north.

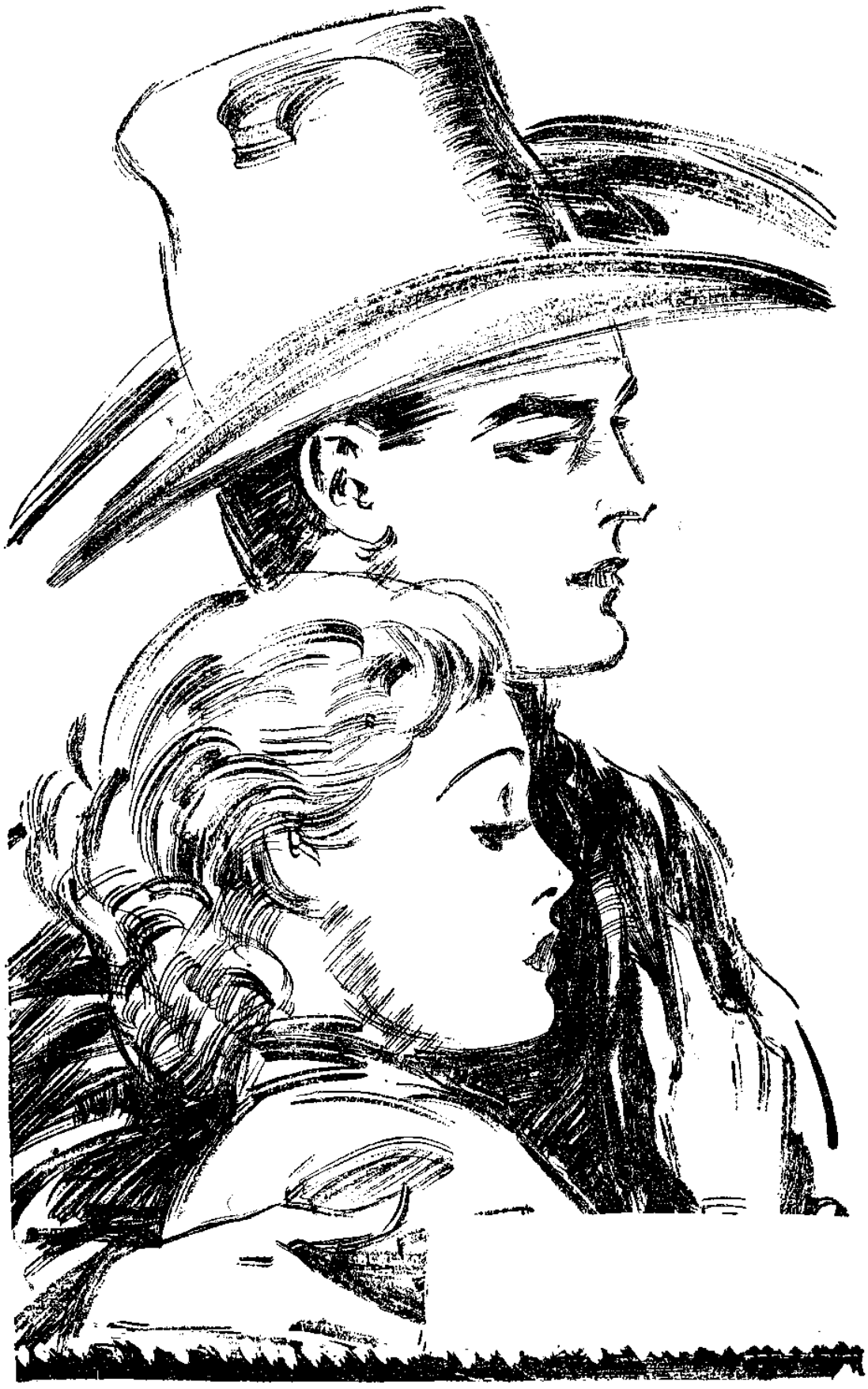
"Five dollars a tone," grumbled Chris. "Soon it'll be one dollar. That's always the way."

The scene between Webb and Jared Wolfgang came clearly before Karen. Wolfgang might be cheating; she did not wholly trust the man. But Webb had no right to mention Wolfgang's name and Theron Blade's together——

"Somebody comin'."

Karen listened. A low, rhythmic beat sounded above the moan of the wind. Her pulse quickened. "Webb said he was coming tonight."

"I was hopin' it was Jon." She could hear his breath, sucking the empty pipe. "Webb, huh. I don't know, Karen," he said heavily. "'Course, I don't want to stand in



"I can hardly believe it——"

yore way. But when I think of what Theron's got to offer you, I can't help believin' you're makin' a mistake."

"I don't think so."

"I know. I know. You're young. It ain't till you're old, when you can look back, that you can see yore mistakes. Too late, then."

Karen smiled. "I'm sure, dad."

The hoofbeats pounded out a solid sound, and horse and rider took vague shape. It was Webb. She could tell by the way he sat the saddle. Chris absently tapped the bowl of his pipe against the doorsill and stood up.

"Well, it's an old man's bedtime." He went into the still heat of the soddy.

NOT WISHING to awaken her mother, Karen went to meet Dalhart. The tinder-dry grass crackled under her feet, each step sending a flurry of grasshoppers before her. A scorched smell rose about her, and a furnace-wind stirred her yellow hair. She watched Webb Dalhart sweep toward her. He stepped down beside her and took her in his arms. Hungrily he kissed her.

The world, and all in it, seemed to fade into the dreams these two wove about each other. Starlight spread a silvery gauze over the prairie, and each blade of grass shone with a fairy radiance. The wind was a scented breeze, filled with sweet whispers. Twittering of a pair of lark buntings from their earthy roost seemed an echo of the peace that lay on the vast land.

"Maybe next year, things will be so I can leave," Karen said again.

"But your folks can come with us," Dalhart argued. "I haven't got much, but we can make out. Jon can ride for me. And if Chris still wants to farm——"

"No, Webb. That's fine of you, but dad would never leave here, unless it was by main force. He won't give up. We'll wait till next year."

"It'll just be another year wasted," he said patiently. "I know how you feel——" He quit, as a wailing cry came from the soddy.

"It's the wind, blowing down the chimney. I must go now. Goodbye, Webb."

He walked beside her. "Down on the Rio Grande, we don't have much wind," he said doggedly. "Good Lord, Karen! This country's enough to run anybody cra——" He checked himself. "I'll take her away, where she'll get well."

She did not answer. Dalhart said, "So long," and stood watching her, a baffled look on his face.

Karen was halfway to the house, when a rifle's flat report shattered the stillness. She turned, seeing Dalhart fall. Dazed, as though the murder bullet struck her, she ran to where he lay. She dropped beside him, moaning: "Webb—Webb."

When no answer came, she looked wildly about her. Her stricken gaze focused on the figure of a man scurrying through the darkness. Fury lashing her, she ran to Dalhart's horse, climbed the saddle, and raced at the assassin. Webb's holstered gun hung by its belt to the horn. She drew the gun, aiming it at the fleeing man.

"Stop!" she cried. "I'll shoot!"

The man stopped. His arms hung motionless, Karen pulled in the horse. "You murderer——" She quit, as though choked. "God in heaven," she whispered.

Jon said: "What you goin' to do?"

KAREN was long in breaking the silence. "You killed him."

"Tried to kill me, didn't he?" was the surly retort.

The girl's forced calm snapped. A spasm of anguish wrenched her mouth, a great sob shook her shoulders. She bowed her face into her hands, tears dripping between her fingers. Jon had never seen her give way to tears. He stared at her, but came no nearer.

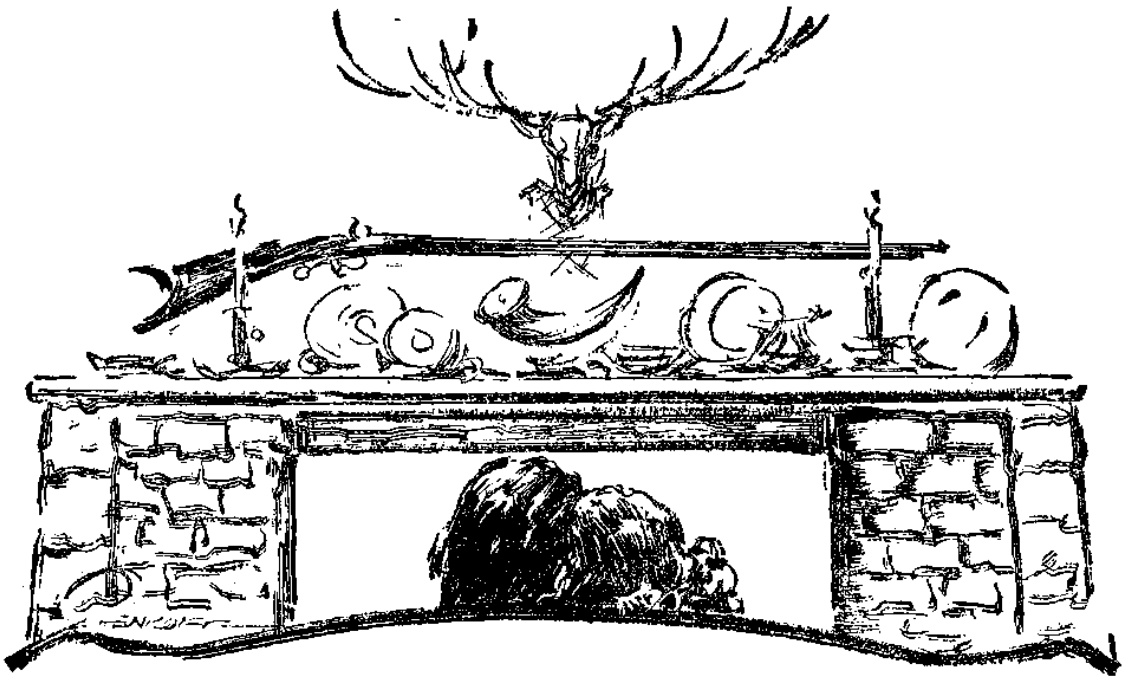
"I didn't know you cared that much about him," he said.

Karen turned the horse and left him standing there. Lifting her *head, she jerked stiffly erect, wondering* what torture was this. A man was coming toward her. "Webb!" she screamed. She raced to meet him. Laughing and crying, she slid from the saddle into his arms.

"I'm all right. Concussion knocked me out." His voice was strangely toneless.

Karen glanced back. Jon was gone. She met Dalhart's eyes, seeing their stark agony. She knew that he knew. Slowly she came out of his arms, and he let her go. "I'm sorry, Webb," she said, and went blindly toward the house. He took a step after her, and stopped. In these few minutes he seemed to have aged as many years. He nodded his head, in the manner of a man who has reached some tremendous decision.

Karen did not look back. Webb Dalhart was lost to her now. Plainly she saw that, as if written in letters of fire. He was lost to her as surely as though Jon's bullet had been aimed half an inch lower. Love of family had molded her life. This *powerful force guided her now. Jon* needed her, more than ever before. Her place was here, at home.



A week passed. Each day she and Chris went to the draw and got buffalo bones. Webb Dalhart had left Empire City. Many of the bone hunters, dissatisfied with Jared Wolfgang's price, were driving their loads south to Wichita. Jon was working steadily in Theron Blade's store.

"How much longer are you going to keep me waiting, Karen?" Theron Blade said to her, as she drove the empty wagon up Empire City's street. He climbed to the seat be-

side her. "Let's not wait any longer."

Her look at him was direct. "You know how it is, Theron."

"Dalhart?" Though he spoke with his usual softness, the tawny color of Blade's eyes deepened. "I appreciate how you feel. Time heals all things. Happiness will come to us."

"I want to be just as fair with you."

"You're a fine girl, Karen. If it's your family you're thinking about, you know what a pleasure it will be for me to help them. I always said that."

"You have helped us."

"Just give me a chance to show you what I can do."

"We'll see, Theron."

He showed her a smile that was quick and warm. He pressed her hand and stepped from the wagon.

MISERY rode with Karen across the heat-drenched prairie. And her gaze, as of its own accord, clung to the southern horizon over whose rim had vanished the rider she would never see again. But her sense of duty to her family was as a solid rock on which to build hope anew.

She stood that night above the old leather-bound trunk that had come with them from Pennsylvania. Gently she lifted the tray, in which were some of her baby dresses, and a musty odor rose from the neatly layered clothes. One after another she removed the garments, until she came to her mother's wedding dress.

As though it were a living thing, she took the dress into her hands. It was of white chambray gauze, and the satin folds and blond lace with which it was trimmed were yellowed with age. She moved slowly to her mirror, and stood there as in a dream, holding the low-necked, wasp-waisted dress before her. She had a vision of herself in the dress, moving up the aisle of the church that Theron Blade had built; and coming up the other aisle—— She shuddered, the dress becoming as a shroud in her cold hands. A moan must have escaped her, for her mother cried out in anguish for the wind to blow no more.

"Good-bye, Webb," Karen whispered, and turned from the image in the mirror.

She stopped, listening to Chris' footsteps enter the house. In a moment he went back to the barn. Low voices came to Karen. She went to the window. She heard Jon's low, hurried speech. A horse galloped away. Laying the dress into the trunk, she hurried from the house. Chris was coming toward her.

"What did Jon want?"

"Oh, nothin'. How's ma?"

"I want to know," Karen insisted.

Chris knew she had this right. He said reluctantly, "He come to borry the Henry."

"Well?"

"It ain't nothin' to get worried about. Jon got word that them robbers are goin' to waylay a wagon train of buffalo bones tonight, at Horsehead Crossin' on the Cimarron. He asked for the rifle to help out the freighters, an' I give it to him. That's all there is to it."

All? Jon was not fighting for the freighters; he was on the other side. Karen ran to open the lot gate, scarcely hearing Chris' startled yell. Already she had slipped a bridle on the roan pony standing at the water trough. She reached for the saddle astride the fence. Chris ran up.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I'm going to—to help Jon."

"You can't help him. You'll just

She drew the gun, aiming at the fleeing man——

be in the way." He reached for her bridle. "Hey—watch out!" Chris sprang back, as the horse shot past him. He stared after her, his jaw slack. "Now, what——" He ran into the barn and began to throw a saddle on a horse.

THE ROAN was giving Karen all it had to give. Far ahead, Jon was a tiny blur. The shape grew no larger as the prairie streaked beneath the roan's pounding feet. Karen settled deeper into the saddle. An hour passed before she began to gain on Jon. Gradually the gap between them lessened. Karen called out, the shrill sound dying flatly.

Jon stopped.

"You!" he shouted in fury.

She reined down beside him. "You lied to dad, Jon. I know which side you're meaning to help. You won't do it!"

He smiled. "No. You don't know, Sis."

"You can't mean——"

"I'm throwin' in with the freighters. Know why? It's on account of you and Webb. He's down there with the freighters. I got to thinkin' how it was between you and him—and some other things. Well, you know now. Go on home." He spurred away from her.

The roan surged abreast of him. "I'm proud of you, Jon. And happy. But who told you about this thing?"

His face set in a mask. "I found out. Now you go on back."

"I'm going with you."

"You ain't! You're liable to get hurt. Who wants a girl taggin' along to a fight?" Jon argued vehemently, but Karen had no intention of turning back. And when he tried to race away from her, she kept beside him.

"Webb ain't a bad feller," Jon said, after a stubborn silence. "We had a talk together, the day after I took that shot at him. I'm sure glad I missed."

Karen's heart beat faster. "He's fine, Jon. And you think he's with the freighters?"

"He's the main one. He's been down in that country ever since he drifted out of Empire."

They were pounding across a level expanse of grass, still two miles from Horsehead Crossing, when they heard muffled reports of guns. The horses surged through the starlit darkness. Quickly the firing grew to a continuous roar, its echoes rolling like distant thunder. Flickers of fire bit the dark. Above the level of the plain lifted a low line of trees. These were the breaks of the Cimarron. Horsehead Crossing lay just ahead.

Jon called out harshly, "You stay here."

Karen spurted ahead of him. She raced along the deeply rutted trail, and willows closed about her. Suddenly there were the wagons, strung out toward the vague gleam of the water. Muzzle fire bloomed like quickly extinguished torches, the explosions deafening Karen. Evidently the freighters had been trapped. They were shooting it out, caught between two lines of ambushers.

The whistle of a ball past her decided Karen to quit the roan. She stepped from the saddle, almost upon a man sprawled face-down in the road. She bent over the man, breathing a prayer when she saw it was not Webb. A pair of mules crashed through the brush past her, trace chains jangling. Bent low, she ran to the nearest wagon. There was no one behind it.

"OVER hyar, Karen!"

That was Blackfoot Smith's voice, but she did not see him. She crept swiftly past the wagon. To her left rose a pile of buffalo bones, rifle fire flashing from its jagged top. Blackfoot called again, and Karen ran and threw herself down in the protected space between the bones and the overturned wagon. There were four men here, two fighting from each side. None was Webb Dalhart. Karen forced the question whose answer she dreaded.

"Where's Webb?"

Blackfoot's old buffalo gun roared. "Wagh!" he yelled into the thundering report. "Another un gone beaver!" He drew the long barrel to him, running his wiping stick into the muzzle.

Karen repeated her question.

"Webb? Ain't seen hide nor ha'r of that coon since the jamboree started." He began to reload. "This ain't no place fur a gal," he reproached her.

Karen lay close to the earth. Her eardrums throbbed. Jon rushed into the barricade. He dropped to his knees behind the wagon box, and the Henry 44 added its throaty bellow to the confusion. Watching him, Karen felt a hot lump clog her throat. But she kept thinking of Webb. The freighters' fire lessened; they were running low on cartridges. Lead slammed steadily into the wagon box behind which Karen lay.

Unable any longer to bear the suspense, she crawled to the next bone heap. Webb was not there. She heard him shout: "Charge 'em, men! Let's go!" And Blackfoot's great echoing yell: "Foller me, boys!"

With clubbed rifles and brandished leg bones of buffaloes, the freighters surged away from both sides of the wagons. Brush snapped, and fearsome shrieks sounded as the freighters struck with their clubs. Swiftly the fight retreated. Karen was vaguely conscious of all this, as she searched for Dalhart. Someone passed her, swinging a thigh bone. It was Jon. "Stay back!" he yelled. She followed.

Brush thrust stiff arms against her, as though to hold her back. Pushing through the willows, she was met by four closely grouped men. The two in front stopped, jerking their neckerchiefs over their faces. Behind these men rose Dalhart's tall shape. Jon was beside him.

"Webb—— You're all right?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, Karen." Dalhart's right hand held a six-shooter. His left hand reached out and tore the mask from the man in front of him.

Karen could not believe what she saw. "Theron!"

"And here's his pardner," Jon said. He ripped the handkerchief from the face of Jared Wolfgang.

Theron Blade whirled on the boy. Something in his glance caused the boy to step back. "Tell her the truth," he ordered sternly. "Tell her how this ruffian stole up on me from behind, while we were fighting those robbers, and stuck a gun in my back."

Jon's gaze was straight ahead, and in his face was a white stillness.

"Go on," Blade urged.

Jared Wolfgang growled. "And tell it straight."

Jon's chin came sharply up. "All right. I'll tell the truth." His low voice held a ringing quality. "I'm free of you now, Theron. I ain't scared of you any more." His voice gathered strength and power. "You're behind all these robberies! You told me to murder Webb——"

THERON BLADE lunged at him, his fist striking Jon to earth. Quick as thought, Wolfgang leaped upon Dalhart, gripping his gun wrist. Snatching the big bone from Jon's hand, Blade swung it at Dalhart's head. Karen's out-thrust hand destroyed the aim of that blow. She had a hazy glimpse of Wolfgang staggering back, and Blade and Webb locked in silent struggle. The gun boomed with muffled report,

He stepped down beside her and took her in his arms——

and Theron Blade sank slowly forward, extending a hand to break his fall.

Jon got to his feet. His glance lifted from the still figure of Theron Blade to Karen. "Theron was bad," he said simply.

"Yes, he covered his trail well." Dalhart holstered his smoking gun. "I knew him down in Texas. He had a different name then. I helped ride him out of town on a rail for sellin' lots he didn't own. Well——" His gaze fell softly into Karen's, and he smiled. "Come on, Jon, let's locate Wolfgang."

Karen shook her head, dazed. "I can hardly believe it," she murmured.

"I know, honey." Dalhart let a hand drop lightly to her shoulder, in passing.

Blackfoot's lusty bellow turned them all around. The buffalo hunter came plowing through the brush, dragging Wolfgang by the collar. "I'm even with the skunk at last!" he shouted. "Been waitin' all these years to fix him for sellin' me whiskey out of a bar'l with rattlesnake heads in it—a whole dozen of 'em!"

Close behind them was Chris. The old man took the news hard. Despair followed his shock. "What we goin' to do now? 'Pears like ain't nothin' left."

"You're comin' to Texas with Karen and me," Dalhart said gently, and firmly. "I got it all figured out. There's good farmin' country down there on the Rio. I'll help you get a start. We'll load the wagons in the mornin'."

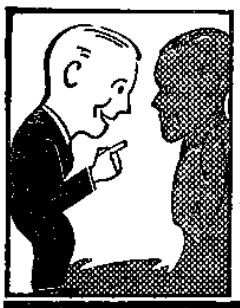
"But I wouldn't want to do that, Webb. Me an' ma an' Jon, we'll make out."

"You're finished here, the same as I be, Chris," Blackfoot said. "I'll be up in the mornin' with my wagon. We'll go down there together." He chuckled. "We'll always have meat, anyhow."

"We won't go without you," Karen said. "And, dad, Webb says they don't have wind down there."

"No wind," Chris repeated. "Well, I'll talk it over with ma."

The newly risen sun laid broad shafts of gold across the devastated plain. The sunlight shone on two wagons piled high with farm implements and household goods, and a girl and a man driving a small bunch of stock. Southbound, to a new land of promise. Karen smiled up at the strong, silent man riding beside her, and her heart was filled with peace.



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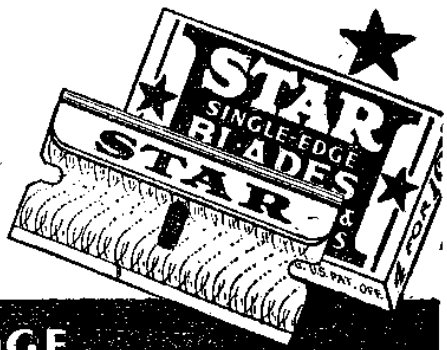

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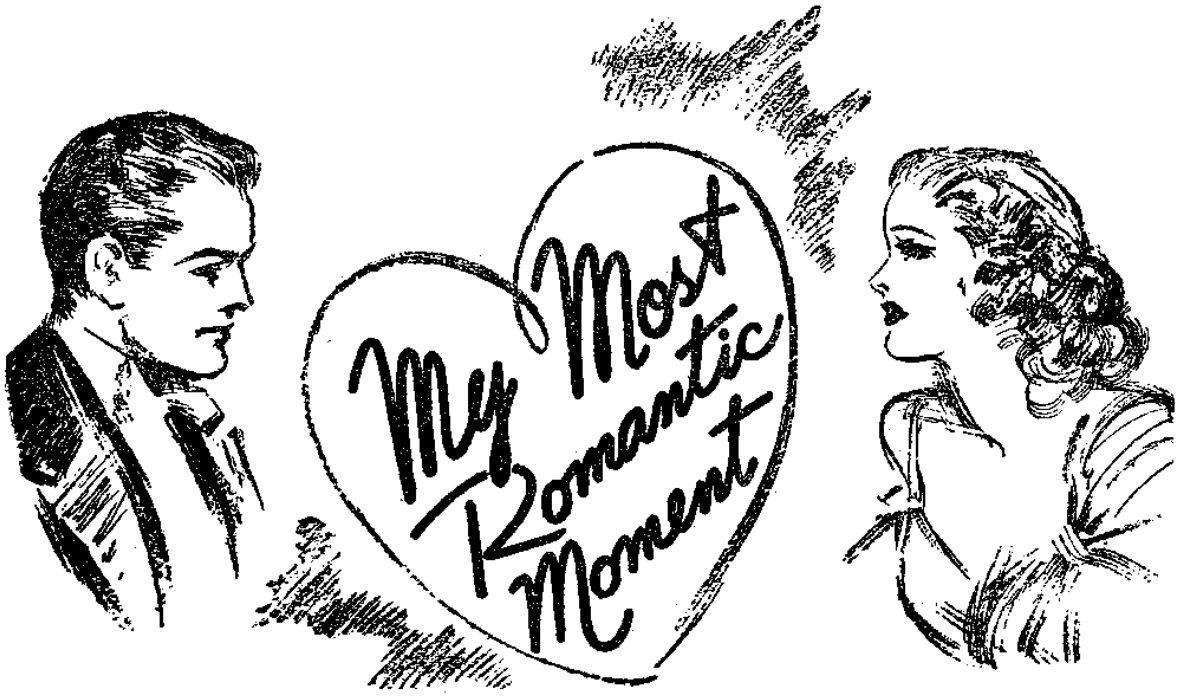

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Montana Moonlight

by
JEAN
ALLEN

Carol craved excitement— but not in double doses!

A KISS to the man who rides the R'arin' Roan!"

Several pairs of masculine eyes turned wishfully toward Carol Compton who had gayly trilled this challenge, and who now sat perched on the top pole of the corral in which the outlaw roan snorted further challenge. Every rider at the TK outfit wanted a kiss from the smiling red lips of this pert and pretty little blonde. But there stood the roan. And nobody yet had been able to ride him to a finish.

Saucily, daringly, Carol repeated her offer—and watched from the corner of a long-lashed blue eye the two new riders who only this morning had hired out to the TK. They still squatted there on their boot heels, backs against the corral poles.

But Carol craved excitement. She usually did. That is why she went on: "Nope! They're not anxious about the roan, I guess. Or anxious to have their nice clean shirts soiled by a spill. Give them the gentlest horses on the place, Pete. And never, never let them ride faster than a dog trot!"

The younger of the two riders smiled a little at that, and the general laughter directed at him. Suddenly he came to his feet, stood there a moment, tall, well-knit, still smiling. Carol's pulse quickened a little as she appraised him. Sweetly she said: "Did I see you make a move, Mr. Tyler? Or maybe you just got up to stretch!"

"No," he answered genially. "I've just been admirin' your beauty, Miss Compton. And I've come to the conclusion that I'd risk my neck any time for one of your kisses."

The drawling resonance of his voice, the challenge of his dark eyes, flustered the girl. To conceal this fact, she called: "How about less talking and more riding? There's the roan. Saddle him up, boys! And just to sweeten things up a bit, I'll bet an extra ten dollars the R'arin' Roan spills his would-be rider!"

"I haven't got ten dollars," said Kim Tyler, the man calling her bluff.

"I have," cut in his older partner, a lean, graying man who said little. "And while I haven't seen this roan bundle of dynamite under a saddle, I'll bet my pard'll be settin' up there on him when he's all through buckin'."

FIVE MINUTES later Kim Tyler was swinging upon the snorting roan. And Dave Merritt, Kim's pard, was calling: "Better start puckerin' up your lips, miss!"

There followed a defiant bellow as the outlaw roan soared into the air, swapped ends and fairly jarred the earth as he came down. Those first three jumps were bad ones, hard for any rider to follow. But Kim Tyler was following them. Enraged to find the rider still nicely balanced in the saddle, the roan cut loose with all the wicked wiles of his clan, squealed vengefully as smoothly raking spurs methodically scratched him from shoulder to flank.

Carol had backed the unridden roan to win this battle. Yet as she watched this fierce contest between man and horse, watched the speed and strength of the horse pitted against the skill and grit of the rider, her sympathy swung toward the

man. Blue eyes wide with admiration, red lips parted, Carol winced as the roan, bucking close to the corral fence, appeared to jar Kim Tyler's leg against the poles. But when the outlaw horse bucked off in the other direction, the rider's leg was down again, the spur on that boot still sweeping from shoulder to flank.

The roan was beaten. Hot breath rasping through his nostrils, his head came up. Dave Merritt emitted a victorious whoop as his young pard hopped to the ground. The other punchers were cheering, too—and lustily yelling at Carol.

Suddenly remembering the bargain she had made, and now observing that Kim Tyler was coming toward her to collect his reward, she leaped to the ground outside the corral and ran like a startled fawn toward the ranch house.

"Uh-huh!" called her father, who had been sitting on the porch taking in the whole performance. "So little Carol finally lost a bet on the roan, eh? Well, you'd better be a good sport and let young Tyler collect."

"Out there, in front of all those men! No! Nor any place else, Dad! I—I'll pay him in money, the same as I'll pay his pard. But I—I can't ——" She fled on in the house.

IT WAS a beautiful night, and Carol didn't want to remain in the house. She wanted to go out into the balm of the night breeze, and along the moon-silvered creek where wild roses spilled their sweet perfume in the air. At last, and after the light in the bunk house had gone out, the girl did venture quietly into the open.

She was walking along the creek bank, listening to the music of star-reflecting riffles, when a tall, dark form moved silently, swiftly from behind a cottonwood. It was Kim Tyler. Carol stifled a gasp of surprise, turned and once more took flight.

But this time the puncher's strong arms swept around her, drew her close to him. Then, while creek, trees and moon seemed to swim about her for a mad instant, Carol felt Kim Tyler's lips on hers, a kiss that was sustained and very real.

"You!" She finally broke free of his embrace. "You—you thief! Sneaking around here this way!"

"Thief?" His tone was as musically soft as the song of the near-by creek. "We made a bargain, you and I, Carol Compton. And—well—a bargain's a bargain. If you can't stand to lose, never put up your chips."

"I don't like your methods of collection!" she stormed. "I'll have Mart Winthrop, the bookkeeper, write out your check in the morning. For your one day's work!"

"I'll do it tonight, if you say so, Carol."

Husky, deep-chested Mart Winthrop was emerging from a clump of thick brush.

"Mart! What are you doing here?"

"Just thought we'd have another one of our little strolls in the moonlight," he answered. "Too bad I didn't catch up sooner. In time to prevent this romantic cowpuncher from getting rough!"

"I doubt if you could've prevented it," Kim answered gently. "You see, Miss Carol owed me a deft. If you know bookkeepin' well enough to handle accounts for a big outfit like the TK, you know that debts have to be collected."

"You keep your dirty paws off Miss Compton!" Winthrop snapped. "If you had any decency about you, you wouldn't be sneaking around here in the shadows after all your cowpunching friends have gone to bed."

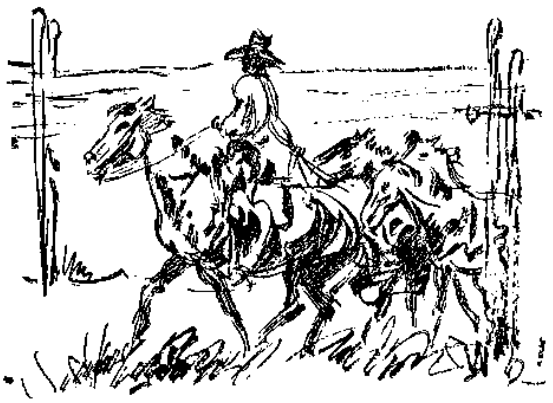
"Maybe you wouldn't, either, Winthrop. Seems like we both had business down here along the crick bank tonight."

"I've told you what mine was!" the bookkeeper rasped.

"And I've told you what mine was. Only I didn't lie about it. Well, good night, Miss——"

"Take this for my good night!" Winthrop leaped, let fly a hard fist which rocked the puncher off balance.

Kim recovered quickly, however. He feinted, then shot over a hard right swing which popped Winthrop on the jaw. The bookkeeper rocked backward, sprawled on the grassy turf.



"Get out!" Coral shouted to Kim while she dropped on her knees beside the prostrated Winthrop.

"Sure," he answered coolly. "I'd like another kiss in the moonlight, but one's all I had comin'. It was a mighty sweet one, though. One that I'll remember long after I've forgotten the R'arin' Roan—and that r'arin' coyote you're nursin'."

"Mighty proud of yourself, aren't you?" she flared.

"Anyone that's ever kissed such lips as yours should be proud."

HE STARTED away, but Carol's loud voice had brought old Jeff Compton hurrying down to the creek.

"What's goin' on here?" demanded the owner of the TK outfit.

Carol hurriedly told him and pointed to Kim. "I want that man fired the first thing in the morning!"

"There'll be time to talk about that in the mornin'," Compton replied. "Go on to bed, Kim."

After the puncher was beyond hearing distance, Carol turned to her father. "Why are you so patient with that range tramp? Why didn't you fire him tonight?"

"'Cause I need him and his pard, Dave Merritt," said the old cowman dryly. "And maybe 'cause he ain't done anything wrong. Anything to be fired for, that I can see."

"What?" Carol demanded. "Are you going to let that——"

"He called your bluff tonight and won. And collected."

"But what about—— Look at poor Mart here!"

"He heaved the first blow, didn't he?"

"Yuh — yes!" she admitted. "But he was only trying to protect me."

"Hm-m-m!" mused the elderly cowman. "Never knowed Mart to get bested in a fist fight before. But then I've never knowed anybody to ride the R'arin' Roan before, either. Huh! Kim Tyler must be pretty dang good at ridin' and fightin'—and collectin' debts."

"Dad!" Carol raged. "If you don't fire him——"

"Easy, little tow-head. Don't go gettin' all mad at your old pard. Come on! Let's see if we can't get Mart up on his feet."

AN ONLY CHILD, Carol was not accustomed to being crossed. And when, on the following morning, she looked out the window to see her father sending Kim Tyler out on a

circle, instead of firing him, she didn't like the turn of things at all. Blue eyes indignant pools, pretty mouth set firmly, she told herself: "I'll show him!"

Kim seemed to sense Carol's resolutions. Yet he went out of his way to speak to her. Twice when she was riding alone on TK range, he had appeared as if from nowhere to tip his broad hat and flash his bright smile—overtures which elicited only glacial stares from Carol.

The third time they met out there in the hills it was late afternoon, and Kim was heading back to the ranch. Since Carol was also taking that direction, the young man seemed to think they should ride homeward together. Carol thought differently, and expressed herself to that effect. "I want you to keep out of my way! Understand?"

He smiled. "I understand, but I don't have much control where you're concerned. It weakens a man's moral fibre to have a pair of big blue eyes swimmin' around in front of him all the time, day and night."

"A man!" she scoffed. "An insolent range tramp who thinks that because he can ride well he ought to be the idol of every girl he meets!"

"Nope. I'm not quite that locoed yet, Carol girl. But even the lowly horned toad can admire the sunset, can't he?"

"And you can admire my dust!" Flinging those words over her shoulder, she spurred into a run.

Kim also spurred into a run, and was mounted on a fleeter horse—much to Carol's discomfiture.

"Glad to see you set this pace!" he called, crowding his horse alongside hers. "Nothing like a brisk ride to wet a man's appetite for supper. That gold hair of yours is mighty pretty, too, streamin' out that way!"

Angrily admitting the futility of trying to out-distance him, she slowed down. Kim slowed down, too. And laughed softly into her angry eyes.

"You'd like to have me fired, wouldn't you?"

"Don't worry. You'll get it!"

"I'm goin' to put it off as long as I can."

"And I'm going to make it as quick as I can. Every time I look at you, and think of that first night, I shudder."

"That hurt your pride, didn't it?"

"No decent girl likes to be mauled around by a——"

"Don't repeat your names again," he interrupted. "I know what you think of me. And I guess that, after all, I'll let you ride alone. I don't want to give you any excuse for havin' me fired. Besides, here comes your friend Winthrop out to meet you. Which means you can stop shudderin' any time now." He loped on ahead.

Carol bit her lip and silently reaffirmed her intention to rid the TK range of Kim Tyler, who had the power of annoying her more than any man she had ever met.

"Your new admirer seemed to get in a hurry when he saw me coming," called Mart Winthrop, riding up.

"I wish he'd keep on hurrying until he was out of my sight forever!" she snapped.

THE BOOKKEEPER laughed. "Then you're not as much in love with him as he pretends you are?"

"In *love* with him?" She stared.

"Well, I overheard him and his sidekick, Dave Merritt, talking last night down by the corral," Winthrop went on. "Tyler was betting his horse and saddle against two hundred of Merritt's money that he'd be married to you—and the TK outfit—within six months!"

Carol's face turned red, then a trifle pale. So this handsome rider of bucking horses was a fortune hunter! A cool person who was willing to gamble, and who gambled to win! Terror struck at the heart of the girl for an instant; terror originating in the fact that she had been playing one part, but actually living another.

She had told Kim Tyler that his kiss had caused only a repulsive shudder. As a matter of fact, that kiss had had quite the opposite effect. The strength of Kim's daring arms, the music of his voice and the thrill of his lips had done something to this blithe, carefree young lady—something known only to herself. One kiss, and the scent of wild roses, the song of a moonlit creek had taken on a new significance, a glorious rapture. But these things Carol had kept locked deep in her heart—and quite resolutely put away the key!

Now Winthrop's words were echoing in her ears: "—he'd be married to you—and the TK outfit—within six months!"

So Kim Tyler had ambitions, had he! Rather cold-blooded ones! Well, after all, it was easier for a young man to marry an outfit than to build one, if he could find the right girl.

"We'll fire him," Carol decreed, dabbing at a tear which had welled to her eye. "If Dad won't——"

"That gent's too cocksure of himself!" Winthrop opined. "He needs the wind taken out of his sails. Hard!"

"Just that!" Carol agreed sharply. "But how?"

Winthrop laughed. "That's easy. I happen to know Mr. Tyler's gun-shy. A couple of days after we had our fracas down by the creek, I followed Tyler, caught up with him in town, right in front of Chris Dorn's livery stable. I called Tyler everything I could lay tongue to, dared him to go for his gun. He wouldn't move. He was scared stiff. Just ask Chris Dorn."

They were nearing the ranch now.

"Take this for my good night——"

At the corrals they met old Jeff Compton who called: "Dorn's up at the house, Mart. Wants to see you about a check on that rock salt we bought from him."

To the visitor waiting on the porch, Winthrop said, "I was just telling Carol about calling Tyler that day in town, Chris."

"Well," answered the long-nosed stable keeper, "you sure called him plenty. Gives you a wide road since that, don't he?"

"Plenty," Winthrop nodded. "He leaves whenever he sees me coming. Like he did this evening."

Carol said, "You were going to tell me how to make him leave for good, Mart. I wish you would!"

"See you after supper, blue eyes," he answered. "Got some business to tend to with Chris right now. All right, Chris. Come on in the office."

THAT NIGHT Carol, sitting alone on the porch, saw Kim Tyler leading a pack horse off toward the north. She knew where he was going, knew that her father, who had missed many horses lately from the Rimrock pasture, was sending a guard over there every night now. It happened to be Kim Tyler's turn tonight.

As he came nearer the house, Carol caught his strong profile etched against the purple shades of dusk, and observed the easy grace with which he sat his own buckskin horse. For a moment her heart was in turmoil. But she fought down the tormenting thoughts, wondered why Kim didn't doff his broad hat and toss some blithe jibe in her direction.

Yet, if he saw her at all, he gave no indication. That strong profile of his was almost grim as he started to ride by, dark eyes straight ahead.

Rather nervously Carol called, "I'll bet the TK horses will be safe tonight—with such a daring gun fighter as you watching over them!"

He paused to reply, "You shouldn't chide the range tramps. Don't you think I've suffered enough, loving the rich, beautiful, holier-than-thou range princess?"

"You mean"—scorn had leaped to her eyes—"loving the TK acres and cattle!"

"I'm afraid I don't quite savvy what you're drivin' at, Princess Carol. You seem wrought up worse than usual about something. Maybe it was just the sight of me, although I'd made up my mind to let you alone from now on—or as long as I could stand such torture."

"You know very well what I'm driving at!" she flared. "But don't think for one minute that you're going to horn your way into the TK. Mart Winthrop told me about——" She caught herself.

"About what?" he parried easily. "Not that it makes much difference what that windbag says. You'll learn more listenin' to the coyote howl than you will listenin' to him."

"Would you dare say that to Mart's face?"

"If you could call it a face, yes. Why? Are you cravin' more excitement again, and after losin' on a roan horse? Does the rich princess want to see her gallant knights battle for her entertainment?"

"GET OUT!" she cried, chafing under the sting of his dark eyes.

"Orders is orders!" He laughed softly, rode off into the hills where he was lost in the gossamer veils of dusk.

Mart Winthrop came out on the porch. Still chafing under Kim's words, Carol said to Winthrop: "Your plans for ridding this outfit of Kim Tyler—what are they?"

The bookkeeper chuckled, divulged his plans. Later tonight he and a couple of the cowpunchers would ride out to Rimrock pasture where Kim would be camping alone. The three men would start shooting up in the air, throw gun-shy Mr. Tyler into a panic—and chase him clear out of the country.

"I've seen that old trick pulled before," Winthrop said. "It works swell when the goat's as yellow as this one is."

Red lips a straight line, Carol nodded her golden head and remarked, "I think I'll go along and see the fun."

"Sure," Winthrop told her. "After all, this little scare party's being held in your honor, blue eyes."

"Then you'll arrange——"

"It's already arranged. I knew this would be Tyler's night out at Rimrock. I'll have your horse ready for you. Only we've got to make it a complete surprise."

"It will be!"

The sky grew bright as a late moon wheeled up over a cedar-crested ridge. Carol was a bit tense. At times it seemed to her that it might not be so funny, this thing of three men with cracking guns scaring another man. Would Kim Tyler really run like a frightened coyote? . . . If he did run, and never came back—then what? Could she ever forget him? She steeled herself by thinking: "So he's betting he'll marry the TK outfit! Well, I'm glad I heard of that. I—I might have made a fool of myself. But now"—her blue eyes flashed—"we'll make a fool of him!"

WINTHROP was leading her horse toward the house. The two other punchers, he said, had gone ahead to spot Tyler's camp. Carol swung to the saddle and the two horses headed northward. As they passed the corrals, the girl saw a man's figure silhouetted there. It looked like Dave Merritt, Kim's pard. Back at the ranch house, and at the desk of the room used as an office, sat old Jeff Compton, his gray head bent over some papers.

As Carol rode on, she tried to fan the smouldering fires of hate against Kim Tyler. Yet, deep in her heart, there grew stronger and stronger the secret wish that this man would prove himself unafraid of mocking guns. Carol found it increasingly difficult to keep repeating to herself: "I hope the cowardly property-lover runs so far he never comes back!"

At last they neared the big, rimrock-encircled pasture cradled in vast foothills. Not far from the pole gate Winthrop halted and peered through the moonlight. Carol thought she could see a man down there by the gate, and two other figures up on the ridge. She jumped as her companion lustily shouted: "Horse thieves! Kill the guard, fellers!"

Winthrop's gun had come out, was now spouting its noisy flames into the night. Up on the ridge above the pasture gate two other guns had cut loose, and Carol's pulse began to leap wildly, especially when she heard bullets whining off the rocks down there close to the man on guard.

"Hell!" Winthrop barked. "Those fellows aren't shooting up in the air. They're plugging away at Tyler!"

If this affair had started out as a joke, it ceased to be that now—so far as Carol was concerned. Kim Tyler's life was in jeopardy. But he was not bolting, as Mart Winthrop had predicted. He was keeping close to the gate guarding the TK horses—several thousand dollars' worth of them—and his gun was spitting jets of red flame.

ONE BULLET whined close to Carol's blond head, another kicking up the dirt in front of Winthrop's horse.

"Get back, Carol!" her companion ordered, wheeling his mount. "That can't be Pete and Shorty up there on that ridge. They wouldn't be shooting at us—or at Kim Tyler, either!"

"Get down there and help Kim!" she cried. "Come on! It's the least we can do for him!"

Winthrop's arm shot out, caught the reins of her bridle. "Don't be a little fool. I can't let you get harmed. Your old dad would kill me if I did. And, besides, I love you!" He was using physical strength along with verbal persuasion now, and was pulling Carol's pony up the nearest draw, toward safety.

But Carol was thinking of Kim, and every shot fired in the fray back there by the pasture gate was jarring on her nerves. Then still another man appeared on the horizon and began shooting toward the pasture gate.

"You've *got* to go back and help Kim!" Carol cried at her escort. "Be a little less gallant, Mart. And a little more of a man!"

"Come on!" he bawled, continuing to pull her pony farther and farther away from the scene of battle.

Torn between fear and fury, Carol suddenly leaned forward and jerked from its scabbard the rifle slung under Winthrop's stirrup leather. With its barrel she knocked loose the man's grasp on her bridle reins, whirled her pony and raced back toward the pasture gate.

"Don't shoot me!" she cried at Kim who, hearing hoofbeats, had whirled in her direction.

"You!" He rammed more shells into his smoking gun. "I'd begun to think you were crazy. Now I know it!"

While lead whistled around them, he whisked her bodily from her saddle and set her down between two big rocks. Then he whirled away again, and his first shot brought down a man who was getting too close. Another raucous voice yelled: "Hey, Gumbo! You hit?"

But other yells were filling the air now, and other men were coming over the ridge—Dave Merritt and old Jeff Compton. They were bringing Mart Winthrop with them, as they closed in on Kim's two remaining attackers. There were more shots, cries of surrender. Merritt and Compton were soon herding their surprised prisoners down to the spot where Carol and Kim waited.

"Chris Dorn and Joe Gench!" Kim rumbled, dark eyes flashing in the moonlight.

"You're treating Mart as if *he* were a prisoner!" Carol shouted to her father.

"Yeah," growled old Compton, gray hair fairly bristling. "And when he was only tryin' to pull an innocent little joke. Well, Dave Merritt and me was onto it. After checkin' over Winthrop's books tonight, and findin' where he'd paid his crooked crony, Chris Dorn, for *six* carloads of rock salt, instead of for the two carloads we got, we thought we'd tag along."

"Which we did," said Dave Merritt, smiling at Kim. "And we found

two cowpunchers, Pete and Shorty, purty badly beat up and hogtied in a gulch less than a mile from the ranch. Some more of crook Winthrop's doin's."

"But this *was* to be a joke!" Carol protested. "I was with Mart all the time!"

"But you wasn't with his crony, Dorn—and Gumbo Crayle and Joe Gench, horse thieves," Dave Merritt said. "Oh, I know 'em, miss. That's why I trailed up into this country with Kim here. To see who was grabbin' TK stock, and sellin' 'em down in my country—with good bills of sale signed by Mr. Mart Winthrop."

"HE'S RIGHT," Kim drawled. "And if you think Winthrop walked down to the crick that first night just to protect you from me, you're dead wrong. He went down there for a pow-wow with Gumbo Crayle and Joe Gench—in the willows. That's why I called him a liar that night; why I'm still callin' him one."

"Liar is right!" Carol turned to face Winthrop. "I know he lied when he said you were gun-shy, Kim. *How* he lied!" She grabbed up her rifle again. "Listen, Mart Winthrop! Were you lying when you told me about a bet that Kim and Dave Merritt had made? Tell me the truth or——"

"Yeah," Winthrop mumbled. "I—I guess that was a lie, too."

"What bet was that?" Kim asked.

Carol didn't answer. She caught his arm, led him away from the others and started to do some apologizing. The moonlight was creating strange magic on her golden hair. Into her big blue eyes had come a lustre akin to that of the stars decking TK range.

"Gosh, princess! You're beautiful!" Kim's arms crept around her.

"No more of that princess talk," she said sharply. Then, voice mellowing to dreaminess: "Couldn't you just call me—sweetheart?"

"Could I!" he said fervently.

There was no more talk for a while. Just the balmy coolness of a breeze drifting across vast leagues of resinous sage, and the contrasting warmth of a kiss from red lips—and not the kind of kiss with which a girl pays off a debt. This was another kind, one that came from the heart to make moon and stars and hills swirl in an ecstasy that Carol would remember in all the days to come.

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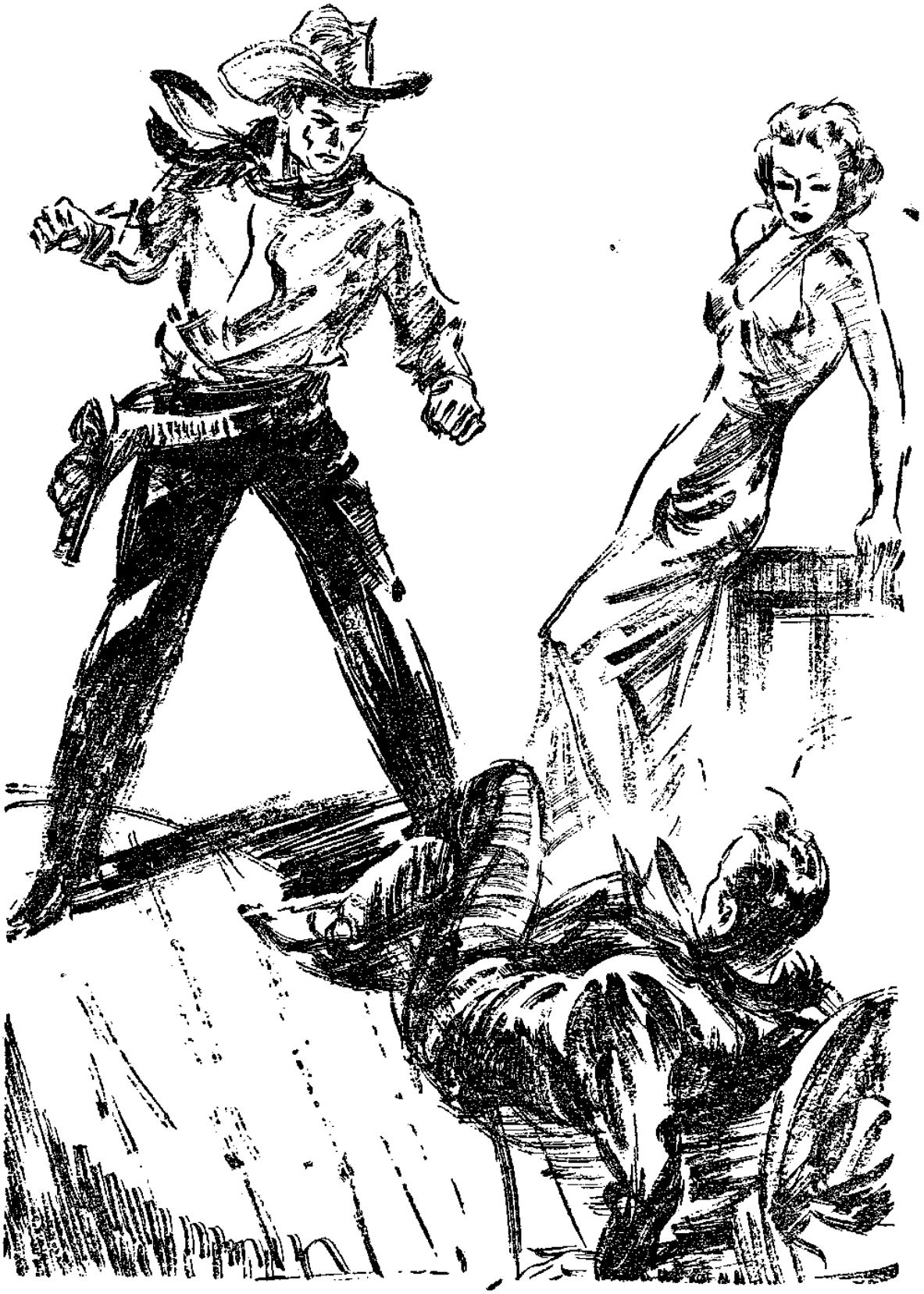
Everything depended on Ann—but could she go through with her rôle——?



Bordertown Woman

by William G. Bogart

YOU had the easy drawl of a Texan. Watching you stroll over from the poker table, I suddenly knew that everything depended upon the next few moments, for I had seen you stuff a wad of bills into your faded denims just before scraping back your chair.

The dance hall and bar were crowded, but already twice this night you had looked over my way. Then you came over and said, "I saw you here last night, too, ma'am. Dance?"

I nodded.

At first you had seemed anxious to get away from there; yet you had hesitated in order to speak to me. Of course, I had had something to do with that. For three nights now I had been there, as you had, and just the night before, you had smiled. Yet, somehow, you didn't seem to fit in with the other punchers in that rough little bordertown place.

You were so quiet.

It was like that when you danced. And you were worried. I only came up to your wide shoulders; but once when I looked up into your bronzed face, I caught you staring at me, too. Your blue eyes were somber—like the prairie sky at night just after dusk—and level. I had the feeling that you had been on the verge of asking something.

You reddened somewhat and said, "Shall we sit down, ma'am?"

The man was watching us from across the crowded barroom; but you didn't notice. So we sat down, and when I said I didn't drink, your eyes sort of brightened for a moment. You said, "I'm glad. You know, I didn't think you did."

Abruptly you leaned across the table and studied me in that disturbing way of yours. You suddenly blurted, "Look, ma'am, you don't belong here. I can tell. You're young and you're pretty, and so sweet-looking. A honkatonk like this isn't the place for a girl like——"

I murmured, "Like what?"

You broke off, your face flaming; then added: "Well, hell, ma'am! Don't get me wrong. You're just not a bordertown woman."

Oh, Lord—the whole thing was going so different than I had planned. And you really meant what you had just said. Any woman looking into those deep, clear eyes of yours would immediately know that.

Working there, I had met all kinds of punchers, and others. Most of the cowboys were all right, in town for a good time; but some of the propositions I got from the others were not all right. Yet you were different. You were worried about me!

You went on: "Look, ma'am, do you really have to work and sing in a place like this? Criminy, a dive like this outside Nogales, on the border! You just don't belong——"

I started to say, "But I——" And then I caught myself and added instead, "I've been watching you, too, stranger."

"YOU'VE been watching me——" For an instant, you looked upset. But you relaxed and that easy smile returned. "Listen," you went on.

"You'd look more at home in the saddle of a bronc, or maybe cooking a batch of sourdoughs for a crowd of starved waddies than——"

"Yes," I acknowledged. "This is new for me. But you see I—I need the work. My folks are——"

I dropped my eyes and your firm hand moved across the table to cover my own. You murmured, "Sorry, kid. That's tough." And you really meant it.

But lying to you was something that brought a tug at my heart. Don't ask me why. I had expected to find you a bandit, a deadly gunman, perhaps; and now——

Somehow I didn't want to go through with it, or to——

It was at that moment the drunken waddy lurched up to our table. Of course, it could have been an accident—the room was so crowded—but the man's hand pawed my shoulder and he said thickly, "Dance, babe?"

You saw how frightened I looked.

You stood up quickly; your voice was low and quiet as you stated, "The lady doesn't care to dance, mister. I reckon you better ask someone else——"

Surprisingly, the stranger wasn't as drunk as he at first had seemed. He swung toward you, his fairly young face twisted, and he snarled, "Who the hell says so, pardner? I guess she'll dance——"

At first, it seemed that you would reach for leather. Your face was strained—almost white beneath the tan. You started to repeat, "I said she——"

And then this stranger blurted, "Say, I know you!" He gave you a quick, intent stare, and added: "Keep out of this, you, or maybe you'd like some of the boys here to learn about that jasper—that danged wanted killer who is your broth——"

As he started to shout the words, he had swung at your jaw. You blocked the blow neatly and your own fist moved in a fast, short arc. It caught him beside the jaw, a crack heard around the crowded room. Music stopped; the poker game broke up swiftly; everyone was watching you two.

This stranger snarled a curse and reached for his hogleg. It was then that you let him have the smashing right uppercut that lifted him clear off his boot heels. He crumpled to the floor; he didn't move.

For a long moment there was smashing silence.

And then a heavy man, wearing the badge of sheriff, moved across from the bar. He stooped down, stared oddly at the man prone on the floor. Next he raised an eyelid. His heavy face lowered to the still man's chest, over the heart. He turned to look at the others backed against the bar and said:

"This man is dead!"

SOMEHOW we got out of there. A puncher had picked up the sheriff's statement. Soon the place was a shambles as men tried to get at you. But in that wild moment you had fired two lightning-fast shots that had smashed both hanging lights. And in the gloom you had whispered breathlessly, "Lady, some day, somewhere, I'll see you again and——"

But I had gripped your arm frantically and cried, "No. I'm going out of here with you! I've got to go! Let me explain later——"

Because there had been no time to talk—perhaps because you feared I might get hurt in there—you dragged me along with you. You had a big gelding at the hitch rail on a side street behind that place,

and soon I was up there on the saddle behind you and we were tearing through the night. Shots rattled in the distance behind us.

But on the edge of town you drew up, turned around to face me and said, "You can't do this, ma'am. Don't you see? I've killed a man! They'll hunt me now, never ceasing in their chase. You just can't ride out of town with a man you don't even know——"

I touched your arm, hard and tense beneath your rough flannel shirt. "Look," I said urgently. "They could say that I was the cause of that argument back there. And I—I can't afford to be questioned either."

I broke off there, letting you supply your own idea of what I meant. And doing that, I suddenly felt small and cheap and mean. I can't explain it even now. It was one of those things that just happen. But out there in the night with you, with the excitement now far behind us, I knew that you were not the kind of man I had expected to trick. There was that sincerity about your clean-cut face, the worried light in your eyes as you spoke so softly and feelingly.

You asked, "You mean you can't go back?"

I nodded silently.

Growing closer again were the sounds of shouting and an occasional shot. Abruptly you seemed to make a quick decision, for you gripped my hand and said, "Then, if you still want to come, perhaps you could help *him*. I need someone, and a girl could do what I've tried so hard to do. You could, I know!"

There was something about watching the glint of white moonlight on your red hair, lining your angular face, that made me unafraid now. At first, I had expected them to overtake us. It had been planned that way! But now——

Now I was getting intensely interested in you—and I shouldn't! Yet I said, "I'll go. Hurry! They're catching up to us."

AN HOUR LATER we reached the border. It was only an imaginary line between Mexico and the States; yet you knew when we were there. You drew rein, sat very quiet for a moment. Far off in the night a coyote howled. Otherwise, there was only the vast silence of the rising hills that bulked so gloomily ahead.

Finally you said quietly, "There's something I've got to tell you." Your slightly trembling hands were gripping my arms and in a breathless voice, you continued: "First, I know your name. It's Ann. I found that out that first night back there. I just knew you didn't belong. And because you're so fine and so honest I've got to tell you about *him*. I'm going to him now, to Steve Donovan of Arizona. He's my brother!"

And I said, "Yes, I know. But I'm still going with you."

You simply stared. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be at all—about me saying that, I mean. But right then and there, in that endless silent night with you, I had to tell you.

You asked, "Then—then—you know?"

I nodded.

"And you aren't afraid of—of me? Steve's wanted as a murderer. There's a price on his head, even though he didn't——"

I said, "No, Jim Donovan. Even if he is your brother, I'm not afraid to go with you."

You showed surprise that I knew your name; yet you didn't question

the fact. Instead, your hand came up in a caressing gesture and touched my hair. You looked into my eyes and said, "Girl, there's something—— Well, he—Steve, my brother—he isn't what they say he is. I'll show you. And he needs a woman's attention. He's hurt, but maybe with your help—the things a woman knows what to do—well, I think he would be fine in no time at all——"

You loved him, didn't you?

I said quickly, "Let's hurry then."

It was a hide-out far up in the hills; a wild, wooded country that few riders ever penetrated. We reached the clearing there between a canyon rim and the ridge up which we'd traveled. You had built a small lean-to and you pointed out the warm blankets and the soft bed of boughs you had constructed yourself. You said solicitously, "It gets cold up here before dawn, so you can sleep in there. I'll build a fire for myself and roll up close to it. But first——"

For just a fleeting instant there was an expression of doubt in your eyes; then it washed away quickly and you went on: "I suppose you wonder why, if I'm the brother of a wanted man, I came into town back there and took such a chance?"

When I nodded, you said, "It was because I needed some money for things for him. He was shot, you know, and I've been aiding him back to health. We needed drugs and stuff, though. So I've been going into that place for a few nights in order to win a stake in a poker game. No one knows me back there near Nogales, so that's why I took the chance. And now, tonight, I hit it lucky."

Then you motioned across the clearing. "Come."

It was a small shelter, built back from the more open space so it would not be too easily detected. You moved on ahead, remarking, "Perhaps you can do some little thing to make him comfortable for the night."

You called out, "Steve? You all right, kid? It's me—Jim!"

There was no answer and you said, "Guess he's asleep." But the way you went stiffly forward said you did not mean that at all. You ducked inside the shelter and dropped to one knee beside a still form lying there. An instant later the sob came from your throat: "Steve!"

I had followed along behind you and was swiftly bending down looking at him. He looked somewhat like you even though he was dark, and heavier, and his face was younger than yours. He had the same full mouth and jaw that was firm.

Now he had opened his eyes and a low moan came from his lips. He managed to get out, "J-Jim——"

He was clutching at a bullet wound in his chest and you gasped, "This wasn't what he had! It was a leg injury, and practically cured. In a week he would have been on his feet again——"

You bent close over him and cried, "Good Lord, kid! What—what happened?"

Somehow he managed to force out the words. "It—it was that devil—that jasper who framed me, Jim. 'Badlands' Jennings! He—he came after you left tonight and tried to —to make me sign a confession that I—I shot that younker. Jennings—he's worried, thinking the law's on his trail. So he wanted to cover up —throw the blame on me so it would —would stick. I——"

Your brother's words had dropped to a bare whisper. Tenderly touching his face with your finger tips,

you pleaded, "Tell me the rest, Steve. Where is he? Where did Jennings head for?"

It was terrible.

There he was, your brother, dying, and I knew as well as you knew that there was nothing we could do for him. It was too late. But by a supreme effort of will power he managed to hang on long enough to gasp, "The—the south trail—out of here. Going to Mexico City! He——"

That was all. Steve was dead.

Later, even though you protested so strongly against it, I helped you bury him there at the side of the clearing. Afterward, you told me about it—about Steve—though I already knew most of it.

STEVE, you said, had been a good kid, carefree. He made friends easily. That's how, up in that Arizona town, he had met Jennings. Only Steve had not known the man was an outlaw. There had been a friendly drink at the local bar; then they had started riding out of town together. Jennings had asked Steve to wait a moment while he stepped into the bank for something. And a moment later the gunfight had started.

Steve had not suspected a holdup, and when men came out of the bank firing at Jennings, Steve had drawn his six-gun. He had thought they, not Jennings, were bandits! And in the mixup, Jennings had shot the bank cashier, leaving Steve to face the trouble alone.

Only, somehow, Steve had escaped, his leg wounded; and later a townsman got the word around that Steve was the murderer! Jennings, safe in another county, also helped to spread the untruth that your brother was a killer.

And so Steve had come to you, and because you had believed in the kid,

"Someday I'll be back——"

you had stuck by him like any brother would.

When you finished, your face was gray and tense. I knew what you were thinking—of how the real killer had returned to murder the brother you loved!

We had walked back to the clearing. Dawn was breaking over the hills now, and it was cold; you slipped a windbreaker around my shoulders. Stooping, you built a small fire and started some coffee boiling over it.

After a time I asked: "And now what will you do, Jim Donovan?"

"I can't go back—yet," you stated. "That drunk—that dead man back there. Well, you saw what happened. It was I who hit him first; it makes me a murderer. And there's something else—I've got to catch Jennings!"

You were trembling.

"Later, when that's done, I'll come back and take what's coming to me."

Your face suddenly softened and you stepped around the fire to touch my hand. "Look," you went on quickly, "you must go back. Explain to them that you knew I was Steve's brother, that you wanted to learn our hide-out in order to aid the law. And get out of that honka-tonk racket. Go up to Dallas, or perhaps Fort Worth and——"

Oh, Jim, you were so worried about me. I blurted, "Listen, Jim, there's something I've got to tell you——"

Far off you must have heard the sound, for you stiffened abruptly and clipped, "Listen!"

Then you went racing up the ridge; to return in a moment and announce, "It's men from that border town, Ann. Coming up here! They'll be here in less than ten minutes——"

And when I didn't move, but simply stood there watching the way your mouth thinned when you were tense, you urged me toward the gelding and said excitedly, "You mustn't be found here with me, Ann. Take him. Meet those riders downtrail, show them what you found up here. Bring them back to Steve's grave, after I've gone. That will get you the reward money. You'll be able to get out of that damned place back there——"

I half sobbed, "Jim!"

You were tightening cinch straps on the gelding's saddle again. You raced on: "I've got a bronc hidden back of here. I'm going after Jennings, now! But I'll be back, Ann. Someday I'll be back to find you."

I was trying to tell you, but then your arms were fiercely about me in that mad embrace and your lips found mine for a heavenly instant. You cried, "You can reach me general delivery, Mexico City. Send me your address after you leave that place, dear. I'll be back——"

You forced some bills into my trembling hand and said, "Now hurry!"

And I knew then what I had to do. Lead them away from you! Those lawmen would come up there shooting to kill—perhaps aiming to kill *you*. Until I could get a chance to tell them——

Sobbing a good-by, I swung down the trail to hold them off——

BUT NOW, Jim, it's all cleared up and you must come back. That drunk was a trick. He's a Federal agent and very much alive. It was a trap to involve you. The fight was planned, in order to make you think you had killed a man and so you would run to your hide-out.

And when you did, I was to follow along with you and learn the location of your brother. You see, that first night you came into that place, to win a stake, a greasy little half-breed spotted you. You had whipped him once for striking a child. His name was Pedro, and he had not forgotten. He knew you, and recalled about your brother. So he spotted you that night and told the border patrolmen, figuring on a reward for himself.

Since I had been in close touch with those lawmen, I was quickly planted there to gain your confidence. You would not suspect me. It was arranged that I should make you think I had to escape with you, too, and we could be followed. They had one of the best trackers in Texas on our trail.

But meeting you, knowing you, I learned of the love you had for a brother who was not a killer at all. I learned of a love that was the same as I had held for *my* brother. Yes, that younker, that cashier who was killed in the bank holdup, was my kid brother, too. Perhaps you can understand now why, at first, I wanted to see Steve brought in dead or alive.

But that's all changed now. You've changed that, Jim. You've avenged those deaths, because that real killer, Jennings, did not head for Mexico City at all. He came back toward the border—and rode straight into the path of those approaching lawmen. There was a fight, and Jennings died confessing to everything.

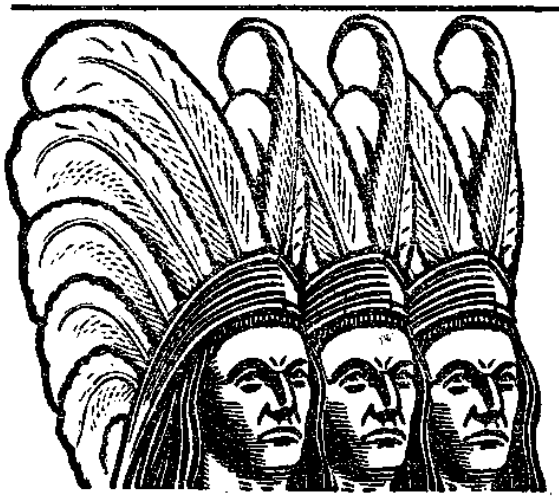
So we tried to overtake you as you headed deeper into the hills, only you must have ridden like the wind. So now I've gone home and you must come here as soon as you get this. They are giving you the reward, since it was you, Jim, who really choused out the real killer.

Besides, there's only Dad and I; and since Ronny's death, Dad hasn't been well. And if you know the size of the Circle Z—well, I'm afraid I can't hold down the spread alone, Jim.

So come back; come back here to Arizona. The name is Ann, though the last name had been changed while I was there as a bordertown girl. There was something you whispered to me in that wonderful, mad moment when you kissed me—well, *you* know what it is.

And now, if that caress meant as much to you as it did to me—and somehow I know it did—then come back. Not to a bordertown girl, but to a girl who can ride a bronc and make those heaps of sourdoughs.

I'll be waiting for you, Jim Donovan, like you asked——



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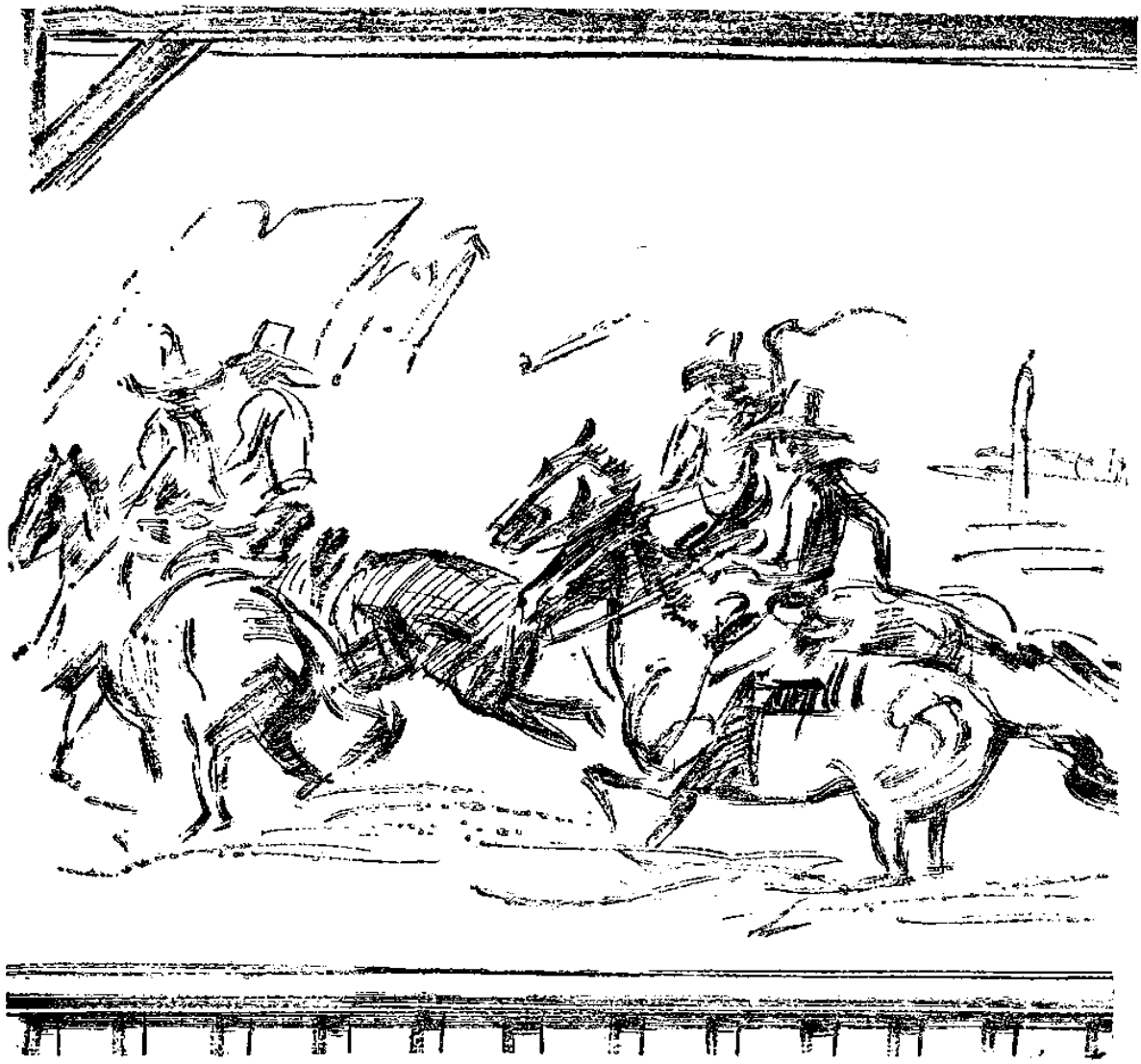


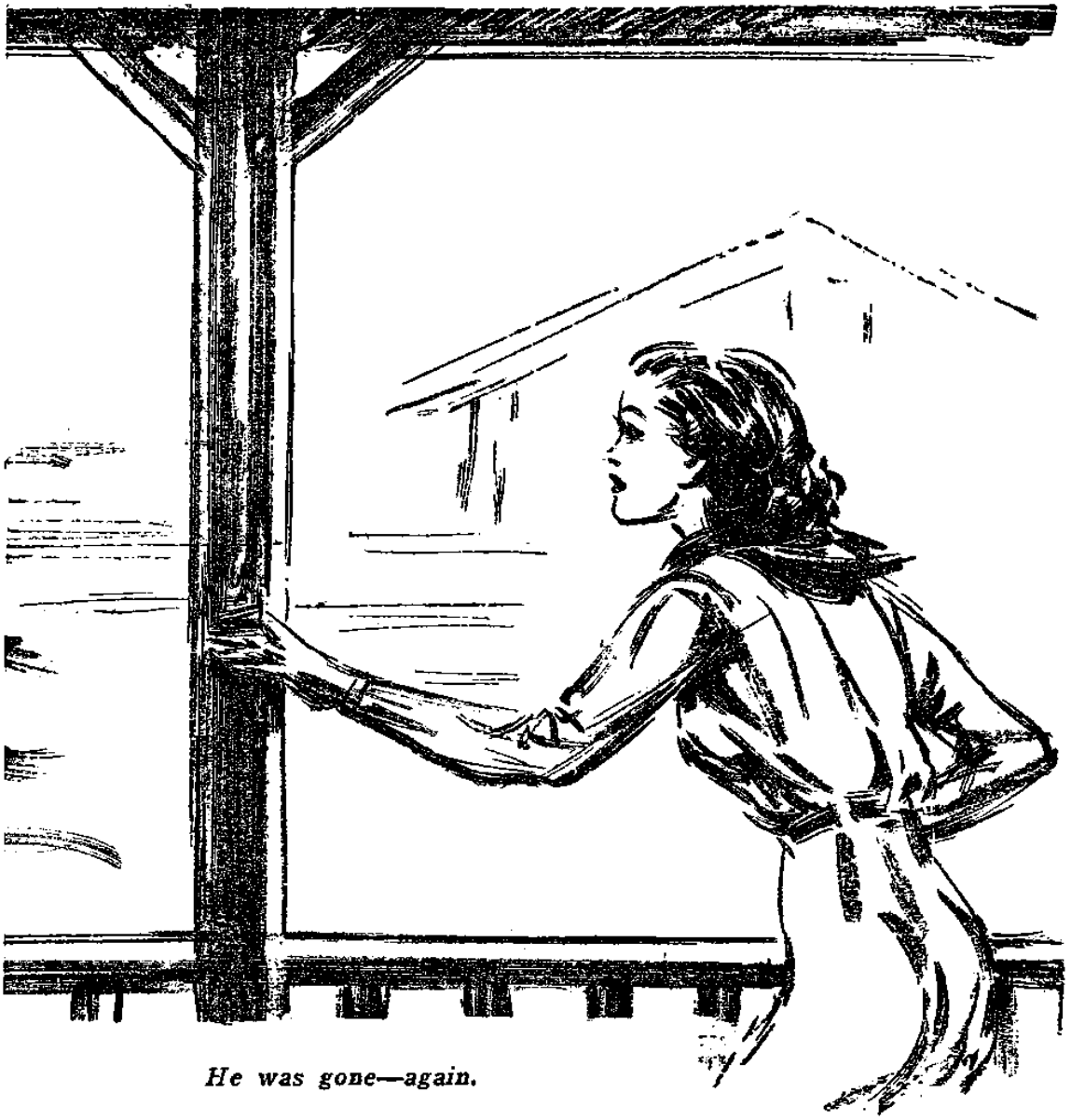
TAX ON ROMANCE

by Frank Gruber

SAND AND ALKALI; cactus and mesquite; burning sun and shimmering heat: that was the Forest Ranch. Ruth Forest sat on the shaded veranda of the adobe ranch house and stared gloomily toward Old Mexico, twenty miles away. Not that it was any better down there. The sand and the heat and the bleakness spread south for hundreds of miles; as it did north, east and west.

It was everywhere. And Ruth hated it, hated it as she did the mysterious trips her father and brother took every two weeks or so. As she disliked the bronzed, furtive riders who came to the ranch and went out behind the corrals to talk to the men of the Forest Ranch.

Most of all, though, she hated the loneliness. Except for Maria Galegos, the fat greasy Mexican woman who did the ranch cooking, she was



He was gone—again.

One look at the deputy sheriff went a long way to convince Ruth——

the only female within thirty miles. Until a year or two ago, it had been sixty miles.

Then, silver had been found near Puma City. And overnight a city of ten thousand population had sprung up. There were women in Puma City now, hundreds of them; but her father did not like her to go there. She'd seen it only once since it had risen out of the desert. But she couldn't help overhearing the talk. Her brother, Bob, and his two cronies, Johnny Miller and "Lefty" Collins, talked much of Puma City. They went there almost every week.

Johnny Miller came around from the rear of the house now. He was a tall man, over six feet in height; lean and burned by the Arizona sun to the hue of a half-breed Mexican. He was of indeterminate age, but probably not over thirty. He wore high-heeled, tooled Mexican boots,

broadcloth trousers, flannel shirt and a huge Mexican sombrero. And two guns, one on each side, slung low and the holsters tied down to his thighs.

He was the wildest, most reckless of the wild bunch that hung around the Forest Ranch. Ruth's father said he was a cowboy. Bob Forest made a pal of him. Ruth had never seen him do any work; she had seen him drunk many times. And he was vicious then; even more so than Lefty Collins, a cold-blooded, sardonic man, sober—but a gay, carefree ruffian when under the influence of liquor.

Johnny Miller saw Ruth on the veranda and swept off his sombrero. "Howdy, Señorita Ruth," he greeted her in his sardonic mixture of American idiom and Spanish gallantry.

Ruth stared hostilely at him. "What do you want?"

He drew back in mock surprise. "What does a handsome young man want when he comes to see a beautiful girl? A smile—laughter—a soft glance."

"You're wasting your time, Johnny Miller," Ruth retorted. "I've told you that before."

"Ah, yes, but is a man to believe it when a beautiful girl tells him no? Isn't it customary for the man to pursue the girl until she surrenders?"

"You'll pursue a little too far. I've a mind to tell my father about you."

"So? And am I not your father's right hand? Am I not the saddle pard of your brother Bob?"

Cold anger gripped Ruth. She detested this smirking, sarcastic man. He typified everything that she hated in this burned wasteland.

"I warn you, Johnny Miller," she said steadily. "You drive me too far and—and I'll use a quirt on you!"

The threat did not seem to impress Johnny Miller. He grinned wickedly and moved toward Ruth. Ruth sprang up quickly from her cane chair and snatched a quirt that had been hanging from a nail in a post of the veranda.

She did not know if she would actually have struck Johnny Miller, for at that moment there was an interruption. Her brother Bob and his other crony, Lefty Collins, came dashing around the corner of the house.

"Johnny!" Bob Forest cried. "Les Clevenger's coming!"

Johnny Miller shot a quick glance at Ruth Forest, then he turned. "What's he want?"

"I don't know," Bob Forest said, "but he's alone. C'mon!"

Ruth stepped off the veranda, but her brother waved her back. "Stay here, Sis."

"Why?" retorted Ruth. "I haven't seen a stranger in a month. I've almost forgotten what one looks like."

"Better get in the house," cut in Lefty Collins, the curly-haired giant. He grinned, showing even white teeth. "There may be dust flying."

"Why? Who is this Clevenger?"

"He's a sort of deputy sheriff," replied Ruth's brother. "I don't know what he wants—but he isn't going to get it. I'm going to——" he stopped, for Les Clevenger's horse came around the corner of the house.

LOOKING at the deputy sheriff, Ruth knew it would have taken more than her brother Bob to make her go into the house. He affected her that way. He was young and fair-haired, with a strong face. He sat his horse with an easy grace and he smiled down at the group in front of

the ranch house. It was the smile that did it. It was so boyish and yet so bold that it did things to Ruth.

"Howdy, folks," the deputy said. He swung down from his horse with an ease that seemed to typify him. Taking off a flat-crowned black Stetson, he bowed toward Ruth. She knew that her face was hotter than the sun had made it.

He was dressed much as the other men, broadcloth trousers, tucked into high leather boots, flannel shirt and bandanna about his throat. He wore two guns, even as the others.

"What d'ya want, Clevenger?" snapped Bob Forest.

"Relax, cowboy," Les Clevenger said easily. "Not what you think. That may be another time." He looked sharply at the others and said, "Hello, Johnny. Hello, Lefty." Then he looked inquiringly at Ruth.

Ruth's brother made no move to introduce her. So she did it herself. "I'm Ruth Forest."

He seemed surprised at that. "Why, uh, I didn't expect——"

"You didn't think we had anything like this on the ranch, huh?" cut in Johnny Miller.

Ruth inhaled sharply. She started to make angry retort to the swarthy cowboy, but the deputy sheriff handled him very neatly. He did it with a mere contemptuous look. Johnny Miller glowered and took a step back.

"All right, Clevenger, what d'you want?" Bob Forest demanded again.

"Nothin' from you," replied Les Clevenger. "Where's the Old Man? My business is with him."

There was no disrespect in the phrase "Old Man". Even Ruth, as little as she understood things, knew that everyone referred to her father as Old Man Forest.

"I can take care of anythin' the Old Man can," said Bob sulkily. "What do you want?"

"The Old Man," repeated Clevenger. "If he isn't around—I'll wait. No hurry." He grinned at Ruth Forest.

"He's in the house," Ruth said suddenly, "having his siesta."

"No, I'm not!" growled a voice behind Ruth. "How c'n a man sleep with all this noise?"

Ruth turned. Her father was in the doorway, grouchy as he always was when his sleep was disturbed. They called him Old Man because he had been around for a long time, not because he was so very old. He was in his early fifties. He wore a beard, a full one, but it was only lightly flecked with gray.

"Father," Ruth said, before the others could beat her to it, "this is Deputy Sheriff Clevenger. He has some business with you."

Her father looked at Les Clevenger. His face, Ruth noted, did not become less truculent. She hadn't really expected it to. Because she—suspected things. They told her nothing, but she couldn't help but wonder and think. About things.

"Well?" Old Man Forest said.

The deputy's hand went carelessly to his hip pocket and instantly the

men about her stiffened. Ruth winced at that. They were afraid he was going for his gun.

Yet all he did was bring a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. He unfolded it, looked at Ruth Forest and seemed to sigh lightly. Then he spoke. "Sheriff Longo sent me out here. It seems that you've overlooked a little matter these last few years. Taxes."

RUTH'S father blinked. "Taxes?"

"Yes, taxes. It takes money to run a government, you know. The money's collected from property owners, in the form of taxes."

"Gawd!" exclaimed Lefty Collins.

Johnny Miller grinned wickedly. "Did *we* ask for any government?"

"Maybe you didn't," replied Les Clevenger. "But——"

"Taxes!" roared Old Man Forest. "Why, damn—I was in this country when there wasn't nothin' but Indians and rattlesnakes——"

"We're not asking you to pay taxes that far back," cut in Les Clevenger. "Only for the last couple of years, since Puma County was formed. The amount is—$850." He smiled pleasantly, but Ruth saw that his nostrils were flaring a little, and that bunches of muscle stood out on his jaws.

"Eight hundred and fifty dollars!" howled Old Man Forest. "Why, you . . ."

"Father!" cried Ruth.

He turned on her. "Get in the house, Ruth."

She stiffened. "No, I won't. You'll just get into trouble. You can't avoid paying taxes. You ought to know that. . . ."

"Thank you, Miss," said Les Clevenger. "You're quite right. We can't make you pay taxes, but we can sure make you wish you had paid them."

"Start right now!" snarled Bob Forest. His hand hovered over his right hip.

Les Clevenger shook his head. "Not that way. There's law in Puma County. If you don't pay your taxes, your property's sold—by the court."

"I'd like to see anyone sell my property," snapped Old Man Forest. "I'd like to see them try it."

"So would I!" chimed in his son.

"And that goes for me," added Johnny Miller.

"You're just making it tough, Mr. Forest," said Les Clevenger. "You can lick me. Perhaps you can lick all the law officers in Puma County. You've got quite a gang of—cowboys—but you can't lick the Territory of Arizona."

"We can sure'n hell try!" snarled Bob Forest. "We're our own government down here . . ."

"So I've heard," cut in Les Clevenger, drily. "That's something you'll be hearing about, too. Later. Right now—I was sent to collect $850 in back taxes. You'll pay it or . . ."

"Or what?" snapped Johnny Miller.

"Stop that kind of talk, Johnny Miller!" cried Ruth. "And you, too, Bob. Father—you've got to pay taxes. Eight hundred and fifty dollars isn't exorbitant. You've got at least fifty thousand acres of land here . . ."

"Seventy thousand," corrected Les Clevenger. "Least that's what you claim. And you've got several thousand head of steers."

"You seem to know a heluva lot about my affairs!" snapped Old Man Forest.

"Yes. I appraised your place several months ago. The amount of taxes is really quite low. I think you'd be wise to pay it, now. If you don't there'll be penalties."

"Me and the boys'll take care of the penalties," offered Johnny Miller.

Ruth glared at him. Her father had been weakening. In due time he'd have come to terms. But not if Johnny Miller and the others egged him into defiance. She knew her father prided himself on being as aggressive as any man on the place. He often did things he had no business doing, just to prove himself as hard as any of his employees.

"You keep out of things, Johnny Miller!" Ruth flared. "You've got nothing to say."

"Ain't I?" sneered Miller. "That shows how much you know."

"Cut it!" exclaimed Bob Forest. "I got an idea." He stepped quickly to Johnny Miller's side and whispered. The swarthy cowboy chuckled.

"Maybe the boy's right, Dad," Bob said. "We don't want no trouble . . . with the law, do we?"

Ruth looked suspiciously at her brother. So did her father. "Eh, Bob?"

"I figure maybe you ought to pay them taxes," said Bob Forest, smacking his lips. "Like he said—they're not so high. We c'n afford it. C'mon ——" He took his father's arm and led him to one side.

Ruth flashed a glance at Johnny Miller's smirking face and resolutely followed her father and brother. Bob saw her. "Keep away, Ruth," he said. "None of your business."

"It is," Ruth said defiantly. "If you're planning anything——"

"It's all right, Ruth," her father said. Bob had already managed to whisper a word to him.

The Old Man turned to Les Clevenger. "All right, I'll pay your damned taxes. Come inside!"

He turned and started for the house. Ruth looked around quickly, then followed her father. The young deputy stepped quickly past her and held open the door for her.

"Thank you," she said—and dropped her eyes from his bold glance.

INSIDE, out of the glaring sun, the house was almost dark. By the time Ruth's eyes became accustomed to the semi-gloom, her father had produced a tin box from a cupboard. He brought out a thick stack of bills, some gold coins.

"You'll give me a receipt for these taxes, huh?" he asked.

"Sure." Les Clevenger brought a pencil from his shirt pocket and scribbled on the sheet of paper. "Here she is. Marked paid."

"An' here's your money."

Ruth was surprised at the amount of money that was still left in the tin box. Vaguely she'd known that her father was well off. But she'd hardly expected to see such a large amount of ready cash in the house. There were thousands of dollars still in the box, she guessed.

The deputy counted the money and stowed it away in his shirt pocket. "Glad you saw it, Mr. Forest," he said. "Some of your neighbors didn't take well to this tax collecting."

Her father opened wide his mouth, then closed it again and shrugged. "They figure we don't need any government," he mumbled. He stepped back and waited for Clevenger to go.

The deputy did not seem in a hurry. He reached into his pocket and brought out a sack of tobacco and papers. As he rolled a cigarette, his eyes came casually to Ruth's. "Don't believe I've ever seen you in Puma City, Miss," he said.

"I've only been there once," Ruth replied. She lowered her lashes, but

"Sorry I have to make trouble every time I come here——"

not too far. "That was almost a year ago——"

"That so? Gosh—you ought to see it now. Puma City's grown. Close to ten thousand population, now. Lots of stores, too." He licked the cigarette paper and smoothed the finished cigarette. "Even a millinery shop opened up. Latest styles from New York."

Every word was a thrust in Ruth's heart. Stores—a millinery. Four years ago Ruth had sent a subscription to Harper's Magazine. She had renewed it three times. It was her only contact with the world she had never seen. The civilized world. She thumbed the pages of that magazine over and over every month. She knew from memory the style of every dress, every hat shown in the magazine. She knew—and her soul cried out for it.

Her father's words cut into her thoughts. "We don't like that kind of life. I wish they'd never found that silver around Puma City. It's spoilin' this country——"

Then Ruth could contain herself no longer. "Spoiling this—this hell!" she cried. "This sand and heat and cactus? I hate it!"

Old Man Forest's mouth fell open. He was startled. "Why—why, Ruth!" he exclaimed. "I——" Then he stopped and just stared.

"Sorry," said Les Clevenger. "I guesss I had no call to talk the way I did. Well—good-bye."

And then he was gone. Old Man Forest shook his head, in bewilderment. "I had no idea, Ruth," he said, slowly. "I thought because you never saw the outside you didn't miss it. Your mother——"

She had never known her mother. Her father had brought her up. He was good to her. She reached out a hand and touched his arm. "I know, Father," she said.

"No, you don't, Ruth," he said. "Your mother was from the East. I —I met her in San Francisco. We were going back East when—well, when you were born. She died here and I, well, sort of stuck around."

It was the closest Ruth had ever been to her father. Almost, she understood him, at this moment. He had remained here because his wife, Ruth's mother, was buried here. He had endured the heat and the sand and the wildness of the country, because——

A GUN banged outside the house. It brought Ruth rudely back to the present. She exclaimed. She'd let Les Clevenger go out of here—to meet her brother and the two untamed cowboys, Miller and Collins.

"Father!" she cried. "Bob and those——"

Another gun roared, and another. Ruth sprang to the door. Her father cried out to her. "Ruth, stay here!"

"They're killing him," Ruth shrieked. "They can't—they mustn't!"

Then she was outside. Lefty Collins came dashing around the corner of the house, blood streaming from his right hand. "Gimme a rifle!" he cried. "I'll fix him!"

Ruth caught him desperately by his uninjured arm. "What's going on, Lefty? What are you doing to him?"

"What's he doing to us?" snarled Lefty Collins. He jerked away from her and sprang to the house.

Then Ruth ran. Around the house, to the corrals. Guns roared and she saw a bullet kick up sand fifty feet away.

Suddenly she saw her brother Bob. He was down on his knees, a Frontier Model Colt in either hand. He was crawling stealthily forward.

"Bob!" she cried.

His head swiveled around. "Get back, Ruth!" he cried, furiously.

She walked calmly past him. At the edge of the bunkhouse she saw Johnny Miller, flat on the ground. He was in the act of thrusting a gun around the corner. Ruth ran forward and kicked the gun out of his hand.

Johnny Miller scrambled to his feet. "Why, you little hellcat!" he snarled. He lunged for her, but she stepped quickly around the bunkhouse.

"All right," she called. "There'll be no more shooting!"

Les Clevenger got up from behind a big boulder. There was a gun in his hand. "Nice boys you've got here," he said, coolly. "Your father pays his taxes and his boys wait for me outside to take the money away."

Ruth bit her lip. The thing should have been obvious enough to her. In fact, she'd half suspected something of the sort when Bob had whispered first to Miller and then to her father. She'd intended to see that they didn't pull anything of the kind, but the talk about the East and her father's seemingly strange attitude—well, it had disconcerted her. She'd allowed the deputy to leave by himself.

"I'm sorry," she said stiffly to the young deputy sheriff.

"So'm I," he said; his gun was still in his hand and his eyes were on the bunkhouse behind her. He still expected treachery. He whistled suddenly and his horse came from behind the bunkhouse and trotted up to him. He mounted it quickly, then gave Ruth a smile.

"Good-bye." Turning his horse, he galloped off.

He hadn't said anything about seeing her again; he hadn't mentioned again about her coming to Puma City. He had collected his tax money and he was glad to be finished with the Forests. They weren't the sort of people he wanted to know aside from his official duties.

She watched him ride away. When he was some distance, Johnny Miller and Bob came around the bunkhouse. "What'd you have to interfere for?" demanded her brother. "We'd have got that tax money back."

"Him, too," said Johnny Miller.

Ruth looked coldly at them. "What sort of men are you?" she asked and walked past them.

In front of the adobe ranch house she met her father. "He's gone," she said, "but no thanks to the boys."

Her father said nothing. He just looked sharply at her, then turned and went into the house. Ruth started to follow him, thought better of it, and dropped into the veranda chair in which she had been sitting before Les Clevenger had come into her life.

AGAIN she stared through the shimmering heat toward Mexico. But it wasn't the same as before. Something had happened to her. Out of the heat and sand had come a young man, a tax collector. He had smiled his way into Ruth's heart. Never again would she be lonesome. Because any day he might again come riding over the horizon.

He hadn't been met with open arms on the Forest Ranch. His departure had been sped with bullets, but—he couldn't have meant "good-bye." His eyes had said otherwise. Not at the last, perhaps, but before then, when he'd smiled at her. When he'd told her about Puma City. Surely, he'd tried to get her to come to Puma City, sometime.

After a while the pounding of a horse's hoofs broke into Ruth's

thoughts. Almost thinking that it was Les Clevenger returning, she got up and stepped out into the sun. It wasn't the young deputy sheriff, however.

It was an Indian who came now and then to the ranch. A dirty, disreputable Apache who had taken up the clothes and customs of the Whites. Ruth had heard the men call him "Apache Joe." He pulled his horse viciously to a halt before the ranch house and tumbled off, a satire of a man in disreputable cast-off clothes.

"Where Old Man?" he asked of Ruth.

"He's busy," Ruth replied distastefully.

The Indian's black eyes glittered and darted about. He saw Bob Forest over near the bunkhouse, grunted and trotted in that direction.

Five minutes later Ruth saw the Indian, with her brother and Lefty Collins and Johnny Miller, tear away from the ranch. Worriedly, she looked after them. Something was up. She wondered if it had anything to do with Les Clevenger.

They did not return until dark. Her father had gone off somewhere, and Ruth did not see him until just before her brother and the others returned. She knew, though, that he had not been with them.

Her brother and the cowboys were in exceedingly good humor. They exchanged sly glances. Her father did not question them during the meal, to which eight or nine men sat at a long table. Ruth left the table before the others. She went outside and waited. In a few minutes her brother came out with Johnny Miller.

"Bob," she said, then, "I want to to talk to you."

"Oh—oh," chuckled Johnny Miller.

Bob Forest scowled at his crony. "What is it, Ruth?"

"Come with me."

He followed her into the living room. "Yes, Ruth?"

"Where were you and the others this afternoon?" Ruth asked, bluntly.

Bob waved a hand impatiently. "No place in particular. Some business, that's all."

"What sort of business, Bob?"

He looked sharply at her. "Nothin' important. Some ranch stuff. Yeah, some steers strayed over onto Lem Clancy's place. We brought 'em back."

Ruth bit her lower lip. "Are you sure that's what it was, Bob?"

He exclaimed. "What's the idea—calling me a liar?"

"Are you lying?"

He caught hold of her arm. "Look, Ruth, the less you know about things—business on this ranch—the better it'll be. Don't worry your pretty head about things. Not at all. Me and the boys c'n handle anything around here that comes up."

"Like you did with Les—with the deputy sheriff today?"

"Is that bothering you, Sis?" Bob grinned. "Kinda took a shine to Les Clevenger, huh?"

Ruth was glad the lamp was not turned up too high. She knew that

she was blushing furiously. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"No? The way you stuck up for that hombre!" He chuckled. "Better forget him. You probably won't see him again."

"Why not?" exclaimed Ruth—and then bit her tongue for having asked the question so quickly.

"Because there won't be any reason for him to come around here again. We paid our taxes. That'll keep him away for another year or so."

Old Man Forest came into the room. "Bob," he said, "I want to talk to you. Come into my office."

Bob Forest winced. "Right away? Got some things to do——"

"They can wait."

They left the room. Ruth, standing uncertainly where she was, could hear her father's voice raised angrily. Then the rumble of Bob's voice, defending himself. A few minutes later a door slammed violently.

DRAWING a deep breath, Ruth went to the room her father used as an office. The Old Man was standing by a window, staring out into the night. He did not turn when Ruth came in. Not until she spoke.

"Father."

He sighed heavily. "Yes, Ruth?"

"It's about this afternoon. You—well, I almost understood you then. And I do want to. I'm not at all happy about the way things are going around here."

"I know," he said. "I've been blind. You're growing up. You're twenty-one. I should have sent you Outside."

She quickened. "To Puma City?"

"No. East. Your mother had some relatives in Massachusetts. I think you ought to go and visit them for a while."

"But you—and Bob?"

He shrugged. "Bob likes this. And I—well, I've been here too long. Anyway, you'll be gone—when it comes."

Ruth walked swiftly across the room. "When what comes, Father?"

For a moment he was silent. Then he sighed. "Never mind that."

"But I want to know. I think I have a right to know. These men who come here to the ranch—Johnny Miller, Lefty Collins—well, I know they're not cowboys. They never work. What do they—do?"

His breath came hoarsely then. "Let's talk about it some other time, Ruth. Not now. I'm tired."

She left it at that.

THE NEXT morning, Les Clevenger rode again to the Forest Ranch. He wasn't alone this time. There were three men with him. Each of them had a nickeled badge on his shirt or vest. A tall, beetle-browed man with coal-black hair and a long mustache seemed to be the leader of the group.

Johnny Miller was loitering around the ranch yard when the riders approached. He disappeared into the bunkhouse. Ruth, from the veranda, saw Lefty Collins peer out from the bunkhouse. After a moment Old Man Forest came out from the corrals. Bob joined him from the bunkhouse. They met the four riders in front of the house.

"Hello, Sheriff," Old Man Forest said.

The black-haired man nodded. "Hi, Forest."

He was looking at her—Les Clevenger was smiling at her. And Ruth's heart pounded madly. So he wasn't angry about yesterday. He seemed glad to see her again. But—what was Sheriff Longo saying?

"—they killed the driver. One of them had a bandage on his hand.

Les, here, tells me he pinked Lefty Collins yesterday."

Cold fingers wrapped themselves about Ruth's heart and squeezed. She hadn't forgotten the coming of Apache Joe and the departure of her brother and his pards, or their return and their joviality. They had held up the stage, killed the driver.

"So we want to see Collins," the sheriff was saying.

Then her brother's voice, harshly retorting. "He ain't around here."

Sheriff Longo looked significantly toward the bunkhouse. "Saw someone jumping in there when we came up."

Les Clevenger dismounted. He let the reins trail carelessly over his horse's head. He moved toward Ruth. "Better get inside the house," he whispered. "There's going to be shootin' in a minute."

Tight-lipped, Ruth backed away. At the instant her brother cried out. "Let be, Longo! You'll start something you can't finish."

"I c'n finish anything that's started on this robbers' roost," retorted the mustached sheriff.

Then Ruth's father spoke, in his rumbling bass. "You figger on comin' to my ranch and takin' one of my boys, you got another guess comin', Sheriff. We ain't afraid of your rep here."

"That goes for us!" yelled a voice from the bunkhouse. Ruth gasped and whirled with the others to face the direction of the yell. She saw the muzzles of several guns poking out of the windows.

Sheriff Longo did not back away. He grinned icily and seemed to shudder. Two long Frontier Models appeared in his hands. Both of them were pointed at Old Man Forest. "Start shootin'!" he said. "You get the first slug, Forest."

Bob Forest swore furiously and went for his guns. Les Clevenger leaped away from Ruth's side and caught Bob by the arm. With a tremendous jerk, he threw him off-balance. Before Bob could recover, the deputy's guns were pointed at him.

An angry yell came from the bunkhouse.

"Tell 'em to come out o' there, Forest," said Sheriff Longo. "Otherwise I'm goin' to count three—and then start shooting. Go ahead——"

"Be damned to you!" roared the old rancher.

"Ruth'll get hurt, Forest!" Les Clevenger said quickly.

That won. Ruth's father turned toward her and shook his head. "All right. Come on out, boys. I promise they won't hurt you."

THERE was some more yelling about that, but they finally came: Johnny Miller, Lefty Collins and two others. Their guns were in their holsters, but their hands were not up in the air.

Sheriff Longo made a quick shift and his guns pointed at the cowboys, away from Old Man Forest. But Clevenger kept his own on Bob. The other members of the posse swung their horses to flank the men who had come from the bunkhouse.

"All right, Lefty," said the sheriff. "Your hand's bandaged. You'll come with us."

"Maybe," said Johnny Miller. "What's goin' to happen to him?"

The sheriff shrugged. "I'm only the sheriff. That's up to the judge."

"Judge McGrew?" asked Old Man Forest.

"He's the only judge we got in Puma City, so far."

A look of triumph spread across Johnny Miller's dark face. "Well, Lefty, seems like you got to go to jail, hah?"

Lefty Collins grinned. "Might be I'll even have to pay a fine. I dunno. I ain't been found guilty of nothin' yet."

"Oh, so you own Judge McGrew?" The sheriff scowled. "Well, that's no skin off my nose."

"We'll go with you to Puma City, Lefty," said Bob Forest.

"I can't keep you from going to Puma," said the sheriff, "but you ain't goin' with me. Not unless you give me your guns first."

"Uh-uh," said Johnny Miller. "We'll ride behind."

One of the cowboys dashed to the corrals. Lefty Collins surrendered his guns and the sheriff's party surrounded him.

Ruth retreated to the veranda. Les Clevenger followed her there. "Sorry, I have to make trouble every time I come here," he apologized, smilingly.

Ruth looked at his strong, handsome face, which was scarcely tanned by the hot Arizona sun. She looked at him and she said, "Is Puma City really like you said it was?"

"I only told you some of it," he replied. "I didn't tell you that it's the wildest city in the southwest. It's a boom town. Or don't you know what that means?"

"Not exactly. I—I know they discovered silver there and that the town's grown practically overnight, but—but you said it had big stores. And white women—girls——" She smiled ruefully. "I haven't seen a white woman in almost a year."

Les' face was serious now. Ruth thought that his eyes had a pained expression and wondered why. He said: "I guess you don't have much fun down here. Have you been here —long?"

"I was born here," Ruth replied simply. She knew that her face was flaming, but she didn't know how she looked to this tall young deputy sheriff. She knew that she was rather tall for a woman and slender, that her hair was blond. But she didn't know how she compared with other girls of her age. She didn't know that she was the freshest, most beautiful girl Les Clevenger had ever seen. There were plenty of women in Puma City—rouged, painted women in the honkatonks, wives of miners, merchants. They were pioneer women used to hard work, a rough life. Well, Ruth Forest lived a rough life—but she seemed to Les Clevenger like a rose in a desert of cactus.

"There's a dance tomorrow night in Puma City," he said. "Folks are coming from miles around."

He was smiling again at her and Ruth's lips trembled. "A dance?" She had been to one two years ago. At Milo Zimmerman's place—forty miles away. There had been a dozen women there, but most of them had been middle-aged or Mexican.

A dance in Puma City! But even as she thought of it, she knew that she couldn't go. She never went to Puma City. "I won't be there," she said, dully.

The cowboys had brought horses from the corral. Lefty Collins mounted, as did Bob Forest and Johnny Miller. Les Clevenger had to go with the sheriff's group.

"If you do come," he said softly, "save the first dance for me."

And then he was gone—again.

Old Man Forest came to the veranda. His eyes were pulled together and he was biting his lip. He went into the house. After a minute Ruth followed him.

Her father had brought out his tin box. He was stuffing money into his pockets. "I guess I'll be gone a couple of days, Ruth," he said.

"You're going to Puma City?"

He nodded. "Lefty's one of the boys. Have to look after him."

"But he's a thief. You know that he held up that stage, father."

"There were four of them," said

"I heard what they said about you——"

Old Man Forest.

Ruth caught his meaning. "And Bob was one of them?"

He did not reply directly to that. Ruth pushed him. "Father, we *are* thieves, aren't we? I mean—all of us? I—I haven't been blind, you know. Or deaf."

Her father sat down heavily. "This is a rough country, Ruth. It was even rougher when I first settled here. The Apaches were pretty wild then. Not that they're so tame even now. But we're right across the border. It's just as wild over there. Mexicans used to raid us regularly, run off our stock. Well—we did the same to them. It was a case of dog eat dog. We won out. I guess—I guess folks farther north'd say that we're rustlers. Maybe we are. I do know, Ruth, that you or I—or Bob—wouldn't be living right now, if we hadn't been as ready with guns as we were."

"I can understand that," Ruth exclaimed. "It's been a case of the survival of the fittest. But Johnny Miller and Lefty—what part do they play in this? They're not cowboys."

He shook his head. "No, they're not. I guess—folks'd call them gunfighters. Johnny——"

"—is bad. He's been a bad influ-

ence on Bob. Bob wasn't nearly as wild before Johnny Miller came here."

"I guess," said Ruth's father, "the time's come for you to go visit your mother's relatives. We'll straighten things out here, then."

"When am I going?" asked Ruth; then she thought of something. "Today?"

Her father's eyes clouded. "Why, I hadn't counted on quite that soon, Ruth——"

"Why not? You're going to Puma City. I can go along with you. I'll get dressed right away." She rushed from the room before her father could protest.

Ten minutes later she returned, dressed in elkskin boots, tan riding skirt and tan blouse. And a cream-colored Stetson. Her father was on the veranda waiting for her. One of the cowboys was bringing their horses from the corral.

Her father smiled at her. "We'll have to buy you some clothes in Puma," he said.

"Clothes!" Ruth almost leaped into the saddle of her horse. Then when they had turned away from the ranch, "It'll take a day or two to buy the clothes, won't it, Father? I—I'd like to stay in Puma City until the day after tomorrow."

"That's all right," he replied. "Be there that long myself. Have to keep an eye on Bob."

IT WAS thirty miles to Puma City. All the way Ruth's heart was singing. I'm going to have some dresses—hats; I'm going to the dance.

That was as far as her thoughts ran. They didn't go farther than the next two days. She didn't think that she was leaving her home, her father; that she was going to a strange country—the East. No—she was going to Puma City; to a dance.

Her first glimpse of Puma City appalled her. When she'd seen the place last, it had been a sprawling huddle of hastily constructed shacks. Some of the structures had been tents, even. There had been perhaps a hundred dwellings.

Now Puma City covered a square mile. There was a dozen streets. The buildings were still mainly of frame, although here and there a new brick building strutted proudly.

Main Street stretched out for more than a half mile. And every bit of it was bustling. There were horses at the hitch rails, horses and mules parading up and down the street. And literally, thousands of hurrying people.

"That's a boom city for you," Ruth's father said. "But they tell me the ore's pinchin' out. If that's true, there won't be a hundred people left here in a year. I've seen it in California. Like this one day, then a ghost town the next. Well—I won't be sorry to see it go. They can't take the land with them, anyway."

Ruth wasn't thinking of a year from now. She was thinking of this hour. It was evening. The stores would be closed. She couldn't do any shopping today.

She was wrong. As they rode down the street, she saw lights going on in every building and every store was crowded with customers. She brightened. "Where are we going to stay, Father?"

"Puma City Hotel, I guess. That three-story building over there on the next corner."

Dismounting in front of the hotel, they tied their horses to the hitch rail; then they entered. Ruth's

eyes widened. The lobby of the hotel was a mere cubbyhole. All the rest of the first floor was given over to a vast saloon and gambling hall. She caught a glimpse of the bar in the saloon. It was seventy-five feet long and even this early in the evening, lined up two deep.

"Hello, Hubble," Old Man Forest said gruffly to the young clerk behind the desk. "Like a couple rooms for the night."

Young Hubble's eyes were on Ruth. He pushed a register before Old Man Forest without looking at him. The old man scrawled in the book. Then the clerk handed over a couple of keys. "On the third floor, in the rear. Quieter there." Still his eyes were on Ruth.

They climbed to the third floor. The rooms were mere alcoves, the partitions unplaned lumber. Each room had a cot, a chair, and a small wash stand on which stood a pitcher and bowl.

Old Man Forest handed Ruth a huge roll of bills. "Run out and buy yourself what you want. I better look up Bob and the boys—before they get into trouble."

Ruth went out by herself. She wasn't afraid of Puma City, even after dark. You couldn't be afraid in a crowd. She walked down a board sidewalk and roughly dressed men stepped out of her path. Ruth didn't know, but these same men would have accosted any one of three-fourths of the women in Puma City. A man can tell.

The next two hours Ruth would remember as long as she lived. She went into a store and bought a dress. She discovered that the price made hardly a dent in the money her father gave her. She bought another dress—and then she plunged. She brought hats, shoes, stockings. A traveling suit and an evening dress. And she still had money left over.

The store proprietor asked if the dresses should be delivered. "I guess I can't carry everything," Ruth said. "Could you have someone bring them to the Puma City Hotel?"

"Certainly. What is the name?"

"Forest—Ruth Forest."

The store proprietor stared at her. "You any relation to Old—I mean, Jeff Forest?"

"Of course. He's my father. He's with me at the hotel. Why?"

"Uh—no reason at all. Just wondered."

Ruth forgot the incident after a moment. She was too excited about her new clothes. But when she returned to the hotel Hubble, the clerk, was talking with a man. He stopped when Ruth came in. Ruth glanced at him and his eyes dropped down to his desk.

Her father was not in his room when she got to the third floor. But there was a lighted lamp in the corridor just outside her room and by its light she found a candle inside.

Her purchases came a few minutes later. She tried on every dress, but there was no mirror in the room in which to view herself. She did not know how she looked in them.

RUTH was already dressed the next morning when her father knocked on the door of her room. She let him in and he stopped and stared at her. She was wearing one of her new dresses, one of green material with a bit of fur trimming on the sleeves and collar.

"Like it?" she asked, her face flushed.

He shook his head and wet his lip.

"You look just like your mother did, Ruth. She was a beauty."

"I'm glad."

"I am, too. I guess I am." He sighed. "I guess your mother's folks won't be ashamed of you. Which reminds me, the stage for Tucson leaves at three o'clock."

A frown creased Ruth's forehead. "Today? I'd hoped to stay here until tomorrow."

"Stage runs every day. I expect to be here until tomorrow myself. Didn't think you'd want to stay in Puma City, though."

"Oh, but I do. Until tomorrow anyway. Did you find Bob last night?"

"Yes. He's supposed to join us at breakfast. I doubt whether he'll be up this early though."

"He was drunk?"

"Not more'n he's been before. He ran into some of the—the cowboys."

Ruth took her father's arm. But there was a worried look in her eyes. "Let's have breakfast."

There was a huge restaurant across the street from the hotel. There were only two or three customers inside when Ruth and her father entered. "Puma City doesn't get up very early. I guess it didn't turn in until daylight. Noise keep you from sleeping?"

"Not the noise!" exclaimed Ruth. "The clothes."

Old Man Forest smiled.

They were almost finished eating when Bob Forest came into the restaurant. His eyes were bloodshot and he looked sullen. "Hello," he said shortly, as he sat down at the table with them.

Then he stared at his sister. "What happened to you?"

"Oh, just a little dress I bought. Like it?"

Bob Forest blinked, then his mouth twisted into a grin. After a moment he chuckled. "Who'd have thought it!"

Ruth looked uncertainly at him. "What—do you mean? Don't you like it?"

"Like it? Say—it's a knockout. I was just thinking some of the folks around here are going to be plenty surprised. They'd never have thought it of the Forests, would they, Dad?"

Old Man Forest scowled. Ruth glanced at him and said, quickly: "Let's give them a chance to look at us, Bob. I—bought a party dress. Why don't you take me to the dance tonight?"

"What dance? Didn't know there was one."

"Oh, but there is!" exclaimed Ruth.

"Who told you?"

Ruth's eyes dropped to her plate. "Why, I—I just heard there was a dance tonight. A big one."

"Yeah," said Old Man Forest. "Seems to me I heard about it, too. Why don't you take her, Bob. Uh—Ruth's going away tomorrow."

Bob was startled. "What?"

"I'm sending her to visit some of your mother's relatives." Old Man Forest cleared his throat. "'Bout time. Ruth's grown up."

"Yeah, she sure has," said Bob thoughtfully. "But what about—Johnny?"

"What about him?" Ruth asked steadily. She saw her father's mouth tighten and made a swift gesture at him.

"Why, uh—Johnny's got a kinda shine on you, Ruth. Thought you knew it."

"Yes, I knew it," Ruth said. "He hasn't given me any chance to forget it lately. But it's all one-sided. As

far as I'm concerned, Johnny Miller can go to—well, to jail!"

Bob Forest whistled. But before he could say anything, Old Man Forest pushed back his chair. "Come on, Ruth," he said. "Let's see the town before it gets too crowded."

The two walked together about Puma City for an hour or so, after which they returned to the hotel. Scarcely had Ruth entered her own room, when she heard boots pounding outside and her brother's voice, calling to her father.

"Dad! They tricked us. Lefty's not going to appear before Judge McGrew."

"What?" exclaimed her father. "Why, he's the on'y judge around here."

"But they claim that stage was carryin' mail which makes it a Federal offense. There's a Deputy U. S. Marshal in town and he's goin' to take Lefty to Tucson."

"Damn!" swore Old Man Forest. "An' I promised nothin'd happen to him."

"Nothin' will," said Bob Forest, grimly. "Johnny's gone to round up some of the boys——"

His voice broke off. Ruth knew that her father had shut him up. He didn't want her to hear. But she'd heard enough. She opened her door and went to the next room. "I heard," she said. "What are you going to do about Lefty?"

Bob's face was dark with anger. His father gestured to him. "Guess

"There was a mistake in taxes," Les said. "I didn't collect enough of them——"

I'll have to hire him a lawyer in Tucson."

Ruth turned to Bob. "Bob, tell me—did you and the boys hold up that stage and kill the driver?"

Bob Forest's lips parted, showing strong white teeth. "What do you think I am—a bandit?"

"Yes."

"Why, you——"

"Bob!" cried Old Man Forest. "And you, Ruth—these walls are like paper. Let's not talk about—such things—here."

Ruth went back to her room. She took off her new dress and put on her old riding clothes, her elkskin boots. Then she threw herself down on the iron cot. She did not cry. There were no tears in her. She wished there were. In books the heroines cried and then got relief. There was no relief for her.

The silver of Puma City had become lead, the veneer of glamor had been stripped off and showed the ugliness underneath. Ruth had left the ranch and the hated dreariness behind her. She had left, so she thought, the viciousness of the life on the border ranch. But she hadn't. It had followed her to Puma City. It would follow her East. No matter where she went, she would still know that her brother was a thief —a killer; her father——

She did not go out for lunch. In the afternoon she heard her father moving about in the next room, but he did not come in to see her. She went out and had dinner alone, before there was a crowd in the restaurant. She came back immediately to her room.

Bob was there, seated in the rickety chair, his booted feet on her bed. His Stetson was tilted cockily to one side. "Get on your duds, Sis," he grinned. "I'm takin' you to the dance."

Ruth stared at him. "The dance?"

"Sure. The town's buzzin' about it. Big affair. Les Clevenger told me all about it."

And then Ruth's heart was pounding furiously. "Did you tell him I was in Puma City?"

"Oh, yeah. He asked if you were coming to the dance. I told him yes. So hurry up. I'll give you a half hour to get dressed."

He got up, squeezed her arm affectionately, and strutted out of the room.

Ruth was ready in twenty-five minutes. When Bob came—ten minutes late—he whistled in astonishment. "You'll be the prettiest girl at the dance! Boy—will their eyes pop!" He chuckled.

THE DAY of gloom was gone. Every nerve in Ruth's body was tingling. This was her first real dance. And she had a new dress, her first real party dress. What would his face be like? Would he be surprised —pleased?

Outside, Puma City was moving toward the Opera House, a brand-new structure that occupied half a block. Everyone, it seemed, was going to the dance. There was dancing every night in the fifty odd saloons in Puma City. But this was different. This was for the real citizens of Puma City and County.

It wasn't until they were pushing through the throng outside the Opera House that Ruth thought of her father. "Where's Dad?"

"Oh, he'll be here," said Bob. "He has some business to take care of."

And then they were inside, trying to get through a crowd of more than five hundred people. At the far end of the huge room, on a raised plat-

form was the orchestra. They were already playing and the dance floor was crowded.

Bob held to Ruth's arm. He seemed to be looking for someone. So was Ruth. Bob exclaimed, "Come on, there're the boys!" He pulled on her arm.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Ruth. "Can't we—keep to ourselves?"

"What? Why, the boys'd never forgive us, Ruth. After all, you're leaving tomorrow——"

Then Johnny Miller saw them. His eyes were bright, his face dark and mocking. He had been drinking.

"Little Ruth!" he cried. "The moth's become a butterfly with pretty blue wings." He reached out a hand to Ruth. She shrunk away from it. "Wha's matter—you won't dance with me?" he sneered.

"She promised the first dance to me," said a cool voice behind Ruth. A strong hand took hold of Ruth's arm. She turned and looked up into steel-blue eyes. She never knew just how it happened, but then they were in the crowd, on the dance floor.

They were dancing, but she didn't know it. She only knew that he was here and that she was with him.

He said: "You look just like I thought you'd look."

She tilted back her head to look into his eyes again. "You see, I came to the dance," she said.

"I hoped you would. I was counting on it."

"So was I. But—I'm going away tomorrow. East. To Massachusetts."

His arm about her tightened. Or at least she thought it did. "You can't go away," he protested. "Why—I've just found you."

People swirled around them, bumped into them. Ruth didn't mind it, scarcely was aware of it. And then the music stopped and Johnny Miller's dark, scowling face appeared out of nowhere.

"The next one's mine, tax collector!" he said. "Tell me it isn't."

Les Clevenger's lips tightened. "You're drunk, Miller. I advise you to go home before you get into trouble."

"I'm Old Man Trouble's son," snarled Johnny Miller. "I like trouble. Start some with me. I'm dancing the next dance with Ruth and nobody——"

"You're not!" said Ruth.

Johnny Miller's face twisted. "Why, you little——"

Les Clevenger hit him in the face with his fist. Johnny Miller reeled back and collided with the back of a man a few feet away. He fought for his balance and his right hand clawed his hip.

A woman screamed and a man yelled. Then, out of nowhere, Bob Forest hurled down on Johnny Miller. He smashed down the dark gunman's right hand in which there was already steel. "Cut it, you fool!" he snarled. "Have you forgotten?"

Johnny Miller had forgotten everything, it seemed, but the desire to assault Les Clevenger. "Le'me go!" he howled. "I'll kill him. I'll nail his hide——"

Another man came out of the milling crowd and caught Johnny Miller's arms from behind. Then, with Bob Forest helping, they dragged Johnny Miller away. He was still screaming.

"Sorry that had to happen, Ruth," said Les Clevenger.

"It's not your fault," Ruth said in a dull tone. It wasn't. It was her fault. Wherever she went the Forest Ranch followed her. In a crowd

of five hundred people she had to be the cause of a scene.

THEY were staring at her, edging away as she came along with Les Clevenger. The tall deputy's face was white as he walked beside Ruth. At the edge of the dance floor, he saw Sheriff Luke Longo and reached out a hand to catch his arm. "Luke!" he exclaimed, in relief. "How're you. You know Miss Forest, don't you?"

"Of course," replied the sheriff. He smiled grimly. "What was the trouble out——" He broke off. Les Clevenger had made a signal to him.

Then the orchestra began playing again. Ruth resisted for a moment, but Les' arm was strong and he again led her out on the dance floor.

"You can't leave now," he said.

Ruth said nothing. She was content in his arms. But not for long. Before the dance was half over there was a commotion at the door of the opera house. The music stopped suddenly and someone yelled loudly: "Clevenger!"

It was Sheriff Longo. Still holding Ruth by one arm, Clevenger began pushing to the door. "What's happened?" he asked.

"They've busted Lefty Collins out of jail!" cried the sheriff. "The Forest gang——" Then he saw Ruth Forest and scowled.

Ruth prayed that moment that the roof of the Opera House would fall and crush her to the earth. She didn't look, but she saw the faces of men and women around her. She tried not to listen, but she heard a woman's shrill voice, saying: "The girl's in with them. She held Clevenger here——"

"Damn!" swore Les Clevenger under his breath. Ruth could feel him trembling. And suddenly she jerked away from him and plunged into the crowd. She fought through it, reached the door. Then a hand caught hold of her and Old Man Forest said, "Here, girl!"

There were a couple of horses at the sidewalk. The party dress was awkward, but Ruth got into the saddle and then they were off, plunging into the night—into the desert.

Old Man Forest led the way. He rode at a hard pace until the lights of Puma City were a mile behind. Then he pulled his horse up to a walk. Ruth caught up with him.

"I heard what they said about you, back there, Ruth," he said gruffly. "I was just coming in."

"Why did they do it?" cried Ruth. "Why?"

"I don't know. Believe me, Ruth, I didn't know they were going to do it. But I can tell you this—Johnny Miller and Lefty Collins won't be around the ranch any more. Or the others."

Ruth laughed shortly, hysterically. "I guess it won't make any difference, Father. I saw the way people in Puma City looked at me. The man who owned the store—the hotel clerk—those people at the dance. I know why you never wanted me to come to Puma before."

Her father looked ahead, into the darkness.

DAWN was breaking over the bleak desert when they reached the ranch house. The men of the Forest Ranch were not sleeping. They were in the big living room of the adobe house. On the table was a chest and they were dividing money. Bob Forest, Johnny Miller, Lefty Collins and the Indian, Apache Joe. Bob Forest winced when he saw his father and Ruth in the doorway. He had, with the others, been so intent on the division of the loot of the stagecoach robbery, that he had not

heard the horses approach.

"I thought you were staying in Puma!" he cried.

"I think you've made it impossible for Ruth to ever stay in Puma," Old Man forest said steadily to his son.

Bob Forest flushed. "What'd you expect us to do? They were pulling a fast one on Lefty. We had to break him out."

"So you took me to the dance because you thought Les Clevenger would be busy with me and you'd have a better opportunity to break open the jail." Ruth looked scornfully at her brother.

Johnny Miller chuckled wickedly. "Sure, Ruthie, you ruined your dress ridin' a bronc like that. And your sweetie, the deputy, liked the dress——"

"Shut up, Johnny!" snarled Bob Forest.

"That goes for me," said Old Man Forest. "You've sneered enough on this ranch. Climb onto your horse and get away from here."

Johnny Miller's lean face darkened. "You think you c'n order me off this ranch, Old Man?" he demanded.

"I have ordered you off!"

"And you—Bob?"

Bob Forest sent a worried look at his father. "Take it easy, Johnny."

"Go to your room, Ruth," Old Man Forest said. "We're going to settle this right now."

A cold shudder ran through Ruth. She saw the ugly look on Johnny Miller's face; the grin on Lefty Collins' broad pan; the glitter in Apache Joe's black eyes. And the tense expression on her father's face.

Frightened, she backed to the door. Johnny Miller made a swift dash and cut her off. "Just a minute, Ruth!" he snapped. "You can stay for the payoff. Ever since I've been around here you've played the lady. You tried to high-hat me. I wasn't good enough for you. Well—I'm as good as your brother, as your Old Man——"

"Cut it, Johnny!" cried Bob Forest, his face white. "Ruth's my sister. And she doesn't know anything——"

"But I do," said Ruth suddenly. "I know what's been going on at this ranch. I know that it's been built up on rustled cattle——"

"D'you know where this money came from?" exclaimed Johnny Miller. "D'you know that your brother Bob and the rest of us held up the stage yesterday and killed the driver? Do you know that?"

"You killed the driver, Johnny," said Bob Forest.

"But you were there. You're as guilty as I am. As Lefty and 'Pache Joe. That fine deputy, Clevenger, would just as soon arrest you as the rest of us."

"Bob'll have to take his chances on that," rumbled Ruth's father. "So will I, for that matter, for sheltering and nurturing a pack like you. But we're startin' from scratch today, Miller. And the first thing is for you and your gang to get out of here."

"That suits me," said Johnny Miller. "We'll start from scratch, then, like you said. Lefty—Joe—scoop up that money. We're takin' it with us."

"No," said Old Man Forest. "The money stays here. It goes back to Puma City."

"Does it now?" sneered Johnny Miller. "Pack it up, Joe!"

"Don't you touch it!"

The voice came from the doorway. Les Clevenger leaped into the room. Johnny Miller's back was turned to the door. He started to whirl, but before he completed the

turn, Apache Joe had gone for his gun.

The gun in Les Clevenger's hand thundered. Ruth saw Apache Joe twitch and stagger back. She screamed and ran to one side. Another gun roared. Johnny Miller screamed like a wildcat.

Ruth saw a gun appear in Lefty Collins' left hand; saw it belch fire and smoke. Her father shook his head like a lion, roared, and his own gun came into his hand. Ruth had a quick glimpse of her brother—teeth gleaming, eyes flashing. And a gun in each hand.

And then, as quickly as it had begun, it was over. Johnny Miller was sprawled in the doorway. Lefty Collins was down on one knee, clutching his bandaged hand against his chest; there was blood on his chin. Apache Joe lay flat on the floor, on his back.

Old Man Forest dropped heavily into a chair and wiped his whiskered chin with the back of the hand that held a gun. Bob Forest was poised on the balls of both feet, both guns still in his hands. He was looking at Les Clevenger, just inside the doorway.

"I won't shoot at you, Les," he said. "So what?"

"You got Miller, Bob," said Les Clevenger, shaking his head. "He would have got me. That's good enough for me."

"Is it? I was the fourth man in the holdup?"

"The passengers couldn't identify you. Besides—you've got the drop on me." Les Clevenger suddenly let his gun fall out of his hand. He raised both hands, then, over his head.

Old Man Forest got up from his chair. "Bob——" he began.

Bob Forest's guns dropped. He turned and looked at his father. Then he swiveled clear around and faced Ruth. He smiled at her. "Good luck, Ruth!" he said. "Maybe I'll write you a post card—sometime."

He dropped both guns into his holsters and ran out of the room. A moment later Ruth heard the pounding of a horse's hoofs. "He's gone!" she said.

Then Les Clevenger was coming toward her. He passed Old Man Forest, smiled—and continued. Ruth's hands went up to her face. She tried to back away. Strong hands took hold of her own, forced them down from her eyes.

"There was a mistake in the taxes," Les said. "I didn't collect enough. I want the rest—now!"

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Girl at the Pothook

"I'll kill you!"

by Dick Robson

TEX LORY swore hoarsely under his breath. He was still quite a distance away from his Pothook cattle claim, that he had left six months before; but there was no mistaking the clothes-lines strung in the back yard or the distinctly feminine apparel that flapped in the Idaho breeze.

The whole thing was impossible. A girl at his ranch—the ranch he had filed on and almost proven title to before Dell Raether, owner of the big Bar Diamond, had driven him out of the Seven Mile country. He spurred Powder, his blue roan horse, down the slope of the hogback.

When he rode closer, he could see that the branding chutes he had built were torn out, and a petunia bed stood in their stead. The watering trough and hitching rack he had set

up in front of the cabin had strings across them—and morning glories were climbing on the strings. Tex Lory was angry in every ounce of his hundred and eighty pounds.

When he'd left the site, after Dell Raether had closed Seven Mile Canyon to his cattle drives, he had been boxed in on the range, with no way of reaching a shipping point.

But a month before, when he met Deacon Sam Bailey, the prospecting circuit riding preacher whom he had grubstaked a year before, everything had been changed. Deacon Sam had made the strike he had been hunting for nearly forty years over on the Kalispell, and Tex Lory's share of that strike was considerable.

Most men would have taken the money and kept away from Seven Mile, but Tex Lory wasn't built that way. He was a tough customer clear through, and the only time he had ever avoided a fight was when he didn't know a fight was taking place.

Dell Raether had rustled his stock, poisoned his water, and finally chased him off the range by closing Seven Mile Canyon to the Pothook herd. But with money to buy more cattle, Tex Lory was coming back loaded for trouble.

And there were those damn petunia and morning glory beds scattered around his Pothook Ranch—and those cussed pink and lavender things flopping in the wind.

He might have missed seeing Dell Raether's roan horse altogether, he was so angry, if the horse hadn't whinnied from the stable. Tex glanced at the Bar Diamond brand on the animal and condemned Raether and everything under that brand to a place supposed to be warm.

He was glad he had come on alone while Deacon Sam brought up the slow-moving herd of cattle he had bought over on the Snake. Deacon Sam might not have cared for the way Tex intended to handle claim-jumping females.

He caught a glimpse of the girl through the open window of the house. She evidently hadn't heard him ride up. Raether was there, too, his chair tilted back against the wall, smoking a cigar and watching the girl through his puffy eyes.

From what Tex could see of the girl, in that one glance, she was good looking in a fresh, cool way. She had hair, the color of sunflowers, falling almost to her shoulders. She was trimly built and small, and her chin tilted up when she said something to Raether.

Tex didn't bother to knock. He pushed the door open and strode inside.

THE GIRL turned quickly, and her blue eyes got bigger. Raether came half out of his chair. He started to say something, but his words got tangled up. He simply stared at Tex, his mouth opening and closing like that of a fish.

Tex pegged his hat accurately toward the deer antlers hung above the fireplace. He calmly unbuckled his gunbelt and hung it beside his hat. He was smiling watchfully when he turned back to Raether and the girl.

"Nice finding things taken care of around here," he told the girl. "Maybe you could fix up a bite of grub. Think so? Dell there looks hungry, and I never knew a Raether that'd eat his own chuck when he could get some one else's."

The girl stamped her foot. "Who are you? You seem to think——"

Tex grinned. "Folks used to call me Tex Lory. Raether there can tell you some about me, but I reckon

you might sort of sprinkle a little salt on what he says."

"Then, Mr. Tex Lory," she blazed, "you can get out of this house. I don't know what you think you're doing, but if this is some new way of pulling a holdup, it doesn't work."

In a way Tex was enjoying himself. He wasn't forgetting those two years that Raether had ground him closer to bankruptcy, while he tried to prove up on his Pothook place; he wasn't forgetting those petunias or morning glories, either.

"I wouldn't go, Dell, not yet." He stopped Raether when that gentleman started for the door. "You know, I saw Flip Jones, that foreman of yours, back along the trail. He's handy with a Winchester, isn't he, Raether?"

Raether sat down as though he were sitting in a cactus patch. Tex noticed the way his hands kept reaching for the gun inside his shirt—and he didn't quite have nerve enough to get it.

"Listen, Tex," Raether stammered, "folks around here thought you were gone for good. We never heard of you for six months and—— People are wondering if you and Clarice aren't working together some way."

Before Tex could say anything, the girl stepped between him and Raether.

"And I'm wondering a few things, too, about both of you," she stated angrily. "This is my place. Dell, you come here as if you owned the ranch. Maybe you're trying to help me, like you say—and maybe you're not. And I want to know just what business you have here, Mr. Tex Lory."

"You know, lady," a voice drawled from the doorway, "maybe you ain't the only one neither that wants to know that."

Tex whirled. Flip Jones, foreman of the Bar Diamond, was standing in the doorway. He was a long, gangling man with a stubble of beard from his ears to his chin, and tobacco juice in the corners of his mouth. He held a six-gun leveled on Tex.

Clarice cried out sharply. Raether came out of his chair as though he had a spring under him. From the corner of his eye, Tex saw Clarice try to stop Raether and Raether thrust her aside. Dell's hand snaked inside his shirt to the shoulder holster he always carried there.

"Let him have it, Flip, damn him!" Raether shouted to his foreman.

Tex was already moving. He heard Flip's gun crash and he felt a bullet come uncomfortably close to his ear. Flip might be luckier next shot.

TEX landed a solid right fist to the pit of Raether's stomach that doubled him up; another fist, that snapped the Bar Diamond owner's head back, took away all interest he he had in the fight. Tex saw Flip crowding in, trying to get a clear shot at him without endangering Raether.

The girl's voice stopped Flip. "I know how to handle a rifle, and I couldn't very easily miss at this distance."

She stood against the opposite wall, holding a light carbine to her shoulder. Her face was white, but Tex noticed the rifle muzzle didn't

waver. Flip noticed that, too, and backed toward the door.

"You might take Raether with you, Flip," Tex said flatly. "When I was here I kept the place pretty well rid of varmints."

Tex waited until he heard Flip's and Raether's horses moving up the trail. "Now, ma'am," he drawled, "it might be right interestin' if you'd tell me who you are."

She looked him over carefully and deliberately from his hand-stitched boots to his wind-burned face under the flat crown of his battered Stetson. Then she smiled a serious smile.

"I happen to be Clarice Mackay, and I bought this place a month ago from Dell Raether. I came here to homestead, and he told me I could buy this land more cheaply than I could buy fencing and building supplies. That's really all there is to it."

"You bought the Pothook Ranch from Raether?" Tex demanded.

She nodded. "It happens I invested every cent I have in the place, too; so you see, I intend to keep it. I suppose you must have some business here. People don't go blundering into the wrong ranch as they do the wrong hotel room, you know."

Tex looked at the girl and very slowly and carefully made himself a smoke. This was one hell of a mess, the way he looked at it. And to happen to a girl like he had Clarice figured, it was worse.

She had given Dell Raether every cent she had for a place that didn't even belong to Raether. Tex was on the verge of telling her to whom the ranch belonged, but checked himself. Clarice Mackay was in a tight corner, and telling her just how badly she had been swindled wouldn't help right then—not until Tex knew definitely what Raether's game was, anyway.

Tex tried not to look like a fool while he stood there with the girl not five feet away from him, looking up inquiringly. For some crazy reason he couldn't figure, he kept noticing the soft roundness of her throat and the slenderness of her waist.

"You know, ma'am," he drawled, "you might say I'm huntin' a job and what happened is just my way of huntin'. No, I know you can't afford to pay wages, but I'm a gambler, too. I'll take a chance on things breaking right at the Pothook."

"I think you're lying," she said.

Tex studied his cigarette. "You've been losing stock, haven't you? Calves driftin' onto larkspur poison and such things. Raether's been gettin' big-hearted and tried to help you, but he hasn't done much. Maybe I can do a little better."

She smiled a little, then. "At least, I hope you won't ask me to marry you every time we meet, like he does."

Tex Lory was swearing to himself when he unsaddled old Powder and turned the half-broken cayuse into the remuda pasture that evening. Those five hundred head of stock, that Deacon Sam was bringing up the Lost, didn't help his peace of mind in the least. Once those stock reached Seven Mile, they had to be pushed onto the range.

THAT NIGHT Tex and Clarice sat across from each other in front of the fireplace, while Tex read every word of the contracts and deeds that Raether had given her. He rolled one cigarette after another, and the more he read the angrier he got.

Twice, Clarice told him in that serious, straightforward way of hers, "If something is wrong, Tex, I want to know."

Something was wrong, plenty wrong, but there was no use telling her. Everything she had was invested in the Pothook, and the Pothook didn't belong to her. That was going to hurt her when she found it out.

"Section twelve, township nine, range eighteen"—that was what she had bought. It was all there on the deeds, just as clear as an Idaho dust blizzard to any one who didn't have a room full of survey maps and know how to read them.

Tex leaned back in his chair and studied Clarice's face. He thought he knew just about where the land was she really had bought.

It would be at the other end of Seven Mile, down in the sage and alkali. Raether had bought it up so he could close the canyon. Down there, she would have nothing but a good view of the alkali flats. Funny, he thought, how he kept thinking about Clarice instead of how he had to get her away from the Pothook before his own herd arrived.

He thought he could see Raether's play, though. Clarice had come to homestead near the Bar Diamond. Raether couldn't send his gun-toting punchers to drive a girl out of the country the way he could a man, so he had worked the scheme this way.

Dell wanted to marry her, though. Tex whistled softly to himself. Raether had thought Tex would let his Pothook claim go delinquent. He intended to let the girl live on it, prove title to it—then if he married her, he would get not only Clarice Mackay but the Pothook. He would own both ends of Seven Mile, the only pass out of the back range; and by owning Seven Mile, he would own the country.

Tex let his hand drop on the girl's shoulder. "Be careful," he told her. "You more likely wouldn't believe me if I told you why, but there's somebody had a mighty pretty little scheme that I kind of stepped into, and he ain't goin' to let it blow up on him if he can help it."

She laughed softly. "I think I can take care of myself, Tex. At least I did pretty well before you came."

Tex strode out to the bunkhouse. That was the tough part of it—she might have gotten along all right if he hadn't come. For a moment he thought of saddling Powder and leaving the Seven Mile country. He shook his head. Raether had chased him out once. He had come back there to give Dell Raether the fight of his life, and he intended to do just that.

There was the girl, too. Every time he thought of her, Tex felt angry at himself. He couldn't leave her to deal with Raether alone. In fact, for some reason he couldn't quite understand, he didn't want to leave her at all.

The next day Tex rode out from the Pothook, being very careful to keep to the open ridges where he knew he could be seen. He was pretty certain that Rather would be scouting the place, and when he saw sunlight glitter on field glasses some distance away, he was certain.

If he hadn't come, Raether's scheme would have worked. The natural thing for Raether to do, Tex reasoned, would be to get rid of him. He wanted to give Raether a chance and when Raether took the chance——well, Tex Lory had always been able to handle his fists or his guns pretty well.

He cut up across a dry mesa with no trees, only low-growing shad scale and greasewood on it. Halfway across the mesa, he reined up behind a rock. That would be a good place to watch.

"I won't be leaving."

NOTHING happened. Tex's broad, sunburned forehead creased in a frown. He had given Raether a good chance to dry-gulch him, and Raether hadn't taken it. That could only mean that Dell Raether had other plans of his own.

It was an hour before Tex jerked Powder back to the Pothook. If Raether had bothered Clarice—he didn't like to think about that.

When he reined out of the pines, he saw the two horses eating the morning glories in front of the house. Raether and Flip Jones were there—and Clarice thought she could look out for herself. That pair coming together meant business—crooked business.

Tex left his horse behind the corrals. When he slipped close to the house, he could hear Raether's voice. Raether was angry and blustering.

"Thought you could double-cross me for Lory, did you? Well, it doesn't work. I want those papers, and I want them fast—understand?"

"If you come any closer, I'll kill you," Clarice panted, and Tex Lory's hand dropped to his gun.

Raether laughed. "You can put up that gun, miss. I don't need to fight that way. Folks around here have been sort of suspectin' you and Tex was workin' together. They thought you might be married. Well, I can talk up both of you so there won't be a decent person in the country look at either of you."

The girl didn't answer, and Raether went on. "So you just hand over those papers. Sure, you bought the dust flats at the other end of the canyon, but I want them back. I'll give you money enough to get out of the country and I'll keep my mouth shut about you and Tex."

Tex heard something that sounded like a girl's hand striking a man's face, and Raether began to curse. "A little she-devil, ain't you?"

Tex prodded the door open with his boot toe. He kept his hands close to his gun.

Flip Jones was leaning across the room from Tex. He had a grin on his stubbly face, and his eyes were following the girl calculatingly. When he saw Tex, he reached for the rifle he had leaned against the wall.

Clarice stood facing Raether in the center of the room. Her small face was white with anger, and her eyes were blazing. She held a little nickel-plated revolver uncertainly. She was breathing rapidly, and her lips were trembling a little.

Raether was sliding slowly toward the girl when Tex kicked open the door. He turned, and the grin on his face changed to a snarl when he saw Tex.

Tex didn't waste time. He saw Flip Jones' rifle coming up, and he bored in at Raether. Raether tried to jerk away, and Tex caught him by the shoulder and spun him so that Raether's body was between him and Flip.

"Dell," Tex spoke through his teeth, "I've been waitin' a mighty long time to hand you one hell of a beatin', and now's about the time."

Raether tried to paw away from Tex. "Damn you!" he shouted. "You heard what I told Clarice. Folks have been wonderin' about her, and I can give 'em a lot more to wonder about—living up here on a man's claim and all."

Tex flung Raether halfway across the room. "If you try that, I'll kill you, Raether," he warned. "You kind of let the cat out of the sack, bein' anxious about those papers. Sold the other end of the canyon, figurin' on gettin' both ends, didn't you? If those deeds are ever recorded, half the range you been hoggin' can be throwed open to settlement."

RAETHER SMILED, and it wasn't a nice smile to watch. It drew up the corners of his mouth and left his eyes calculating and angry. He let one hand drop on the table and over a stack of papers clipped together by a rubber band.

"The only trouble is, you won't record them, Tex," he sneered. "All I'd have to do is to drop a few hints about you and Clarice here around town. Punchers would figure she had a hell of a lot of nerve bein' as stand-offish as she was with 'em."

Tex knew when he was whipped—and it looked as if he were whipped then. He glanced at the girl. If she hadn't been so desirable, he wouldn't have cared. If she hadn't been so spunky and nervy about trying to build up the Pothook Ranch, he might have let Dell Raether do all the talking he had a mind to do.

But Tex knew what talk of that kind would do to a girl. Cow country people are strict where women are concerned. A girl is either on the right or the wrong side, and there is no in-between line.

But that wasn't going to stop Tex from taking the grin off Dell Raether's soft, puffy face. Tex's shoulders were hunched down, and his fists were coming up when he bored in at Raether.

Clarice flung herself between him and Raether and pushed him back. Her face was upturned close to his, and her voice was pleading.

"Don't try to fight, Tex. I made a mess of things here. You'd only get into trouble if you tried to help me. I—I'm sorry about being here at the Pothook, but I'm leaving now."

Her head was high, and her eyes looked straight ahead as she left the room. Tex watched her rope a horse from the pasture and saddle it. Raether was still grinning and still just as sure of himself as ever.

"Hell of a nice game you play, Raether," Tex snarled. "Breaking a girl like that; taking every cent she has and driving her out of the country."

"Figure on doin' anything about it?" Raether smirked.

Tex did one thing about it, then. He let his right fist rocket up from

his knees and end against Raether's mouth. Raether struck the opposite wall of the room and slid down it until he was sitting on the floor.

Tex picked up the stack of contracts and deeds from the table and shoved them inside his vest. He couldn't record them, but Raether wasn't going to have a chance to destroy those papers—not yet anyway.

He saw Clarice ride across the hogback that shut the Pothook off from the rest of the rolling foothills.

Tex swore to himself. If it wasn't for Clarice, he'd have Raether just where he had wanted the man for a long time. He walked stiffly out to the hitching rack, where he had left Powder, and picked up the reins.

Five hundred head of cattle were due at the ranch at any time. Tex had money enough to fight Raether for every inch of ground Raether claimed. He would break through Seven Mile pass one way or another. It might take years of fighting, but he would break the private little cattle kingdom of Dell Raether.

Somehow, none of that seemed important now. Tex saw Clarice stop a moment on top of the hogback; then rein down the trail on the other side. And somehow, Clarice Mackay was all that seemed very important. But if Raether ever talked as he'd threatened, Tex would only make matters worse by trying to stop her or by trying to see her again.

Without particularly caring, he heard Raether and Flip Jones ride away from the ranch. The fight was just starting, but it would be an empty fight now—even if he won.

EVERYTHING in the cabin reminded him of Clarice; the frilly curtains, vases on the mantel—he even liked the looks of the petunia beds where his branding chutes used to be. Tex was whittling kindling into the stove, when he heard someone singing a long way off along the hogback.

It took a good deal of imagination to recognize the song as "Rock of Ages" the way Deacon Sam Bailey's cracked voice tortured it. Tex smiled grimly. Deacon Sam and the outfit were pushing up with five hundred wild-eyed cattle. It wouldn't take the outfit long to obliterate all of the little feminine touches that Clarice had left at the Pothook.

Tex rode out to meet Deacon Sam. The deacon pushed back his straight-brimmed hat, wiped his pink face, and peered at Tex through a pair of shrewd, alert eyes.

"Tex," the deacon said in that chirpy voice of his, "there's talk about you in Challis and all the way up the line. Of course—ah—I'm what might be termed a broad-minded man, but—ah——"

Tex looked at the deacon through cloudy eyes. He didn't say much, but his mouth clamped down at the corners. "I should have figured Raether closer," he muttered.

Deacon Sam Bailey went on talking. He had seen mining towns and cow towns enough that he didn't condemn a man's actions—but he knew Tex Lory, too, and he was puzzled.

"Of course, Tex," he chirped, "a man can live down things like that, but it's—ah—it's different with a girl."

Tex stared straight ahead. He knew all of that. Wherever Clarice went, she would be pointed out as "a girl who looked all right, but——"

"We're goin' down into town," he told Deacon Sam harshly. "If we happen to meet up with Dell Raether, you might do some buryin'."

"Get those dogies broke out in the horse pastures," he shouted to one of the riders with the herd. "And damn you, if you drive 'em over those

flower beds, you'll lose some hide off your nose!"

Tex Lory had an idea simmering around with all the anger there was in his head. At first, it looked like a good hunch; then, the more he thought of Clarice Mackay, the worse it looked. Still, it wasn't worse than doing nothing.

It was afternoon when Tex and Deacon Sam rode into the little cow town of Selma, set down in the pine trees with the Lemhi Mountains hanging over it. Tex noticed that Dell Raether's and Flip Jones' horses were in front of the courthouse. Raether was taking no chances.

DISMOUNTING in front of the Commercial House—the only hotel in Selma—Tex motioned to Deacon Sam to follow him inside. A rheumy-eyed clerk looked up and grinned at him knowingly.

"Has my wife taken a room here?" Tex demanded.

The clerk smirked. "Your wife? Well, that there girl that folks has been wonderin' about stopped here all right."

"I said my wife," Tex let a calloused hand drop on the clerk's shoulder and dragged him across the desk. "Understand that? My wife."

"Tex!" Clarice called to him sharply from the doorway.

Tex turned around and looked at her. She was dressed in a simply cut suit and evidently intended to leave on the daily train when it went through on the little narrow gauge railway. Standing there in the doorway with the hills behind her, looking up at him in the half-wistful, half-determined way she had, made his plan look more rotten than ever.

Tex hesitated a moment; then took the girl's arm and led her out on the deserted veranda. After telling the hotel clerk what he had, Tex Lory knew it wouldn't be an hour before everyone in Selma knew, or thought he knew, that he and Clarice were married.

"Well, Tex?" she asked him quietly.

Tex spilled tobacco when he tried to roll a smoke. Out there on the Pothook, what he intended to do had looked simple. Now it looked anything but simple.

"Ma'am," he told her, "I ain't layin' claim to any halo or such. There've been times I've had to live rough, but there's nothing that a girl would ever have to be ashamed of."

"You mean——"

Tex finally got the cigarette going. "I mean we could drop over into Montana and take out a license. Deacon Sam is mighty forgetful about dates and things like that an'—well, it won't mean a thing. I'll pull out as soon as we're married——"

"Is that the way you want it, Tex?" she asked him.

Tex didn't have time to answer. Deacon Sam's high-pitched voice shouted behind him, "Look out, Tex!"

Tex Lory's hands were dropping to his gunbelt when he turned. Raether and Flip were crossing the veranda coming toward him.

What good looks Dell Raether ever had were gone then. His face was purple, and the blood that was pounding in his neck seemed about to burst the skin. Flip carried a Winchester tucked under his arm, and his finger was inside the trigger guard.

"Thought you could play me for a fool, did you, Lory?" Raether snarled. "Damn you, you kept still about being married to Clarice so you could get down here with them papers. It doesn't work, though, and right here's the reason it don't."

Raether's hand snaked inside his

shirt, and Tex caught the glitter of sunlight on gun steel. He didn't dare to reach for his own gun. If there was shooting, Clarice was standing too close to him, and bullets had a way of going wild.

Tex didn't take time to think what he was doing when he lunged at Raether. Raether's gun exploded before Tex reached him.

Tex felt the slug whip open his vest and plow a furrow across his side. Raether backed up a step, trying to bring his gun up again. Tex saw Flip's rifle coming to his shoulder.

Then Tex threw himself into Raether. A fist landed solidly in Dell Raether's midsection, and before he could double up, another fist, that rocketed into his chin, straightened him.

Tex heard Clarice scream as Flip's gun leveled on him. There was a crack and a howl of pain. Tex whirled, keeping the wall behind him. Flip was staring incredulously at blood that was dripping from his shirt sleeve.

Deacon Sam Bailey stood in the doorway of the hotel. He was holding an old cap and ball Colt that by all the rights of firearms should have been retired from service twenty years before. Smoke was spiraling from the gun barrel.

Tex grinned. Deacon Sam might be a man of peace and a preacher, but somehow he always found a gun in his hand when one was needed.

Raether clawed his way to his feet and stood swaying for a moment. He looked at the gun in Deacon Sam's hand and at Tex Lory's glittering eyes; Raether changed his mind about any idea of fight he might have had. He left the veranda with a great display of speed.

Tex looked at Clarice. "Train leaves pretty quick. After—well, after we're married, you won't have any trouble getting an annulment. Deacon Sam there will swear I'm plumb worthless."

Clarice laid her hand on Tex's arm. "Tex, if that's the way you want it, I'll do it. But, Tex—oh, I know it's foolish. We haven't known each other long enough—we don't know each other at all—but—I guess I love you, Tex."

Tex looked down into her serious, questioning face. He was thinking of those petunia beds where his branding chutes had been; and those morning glories climbing all over his hitching rack—that and the girl who had changed the Pothook into a ranch instead of a staked-down claim.

"Ma'am," he said awkwardly. "I reckon I won't ever be leavin'."

HOW GIRLS IN THEIR 20's CAN ATTRACT MEN

Remember it's gay, vivacious girls, full of the joy of living and bubbling over with energetic pep to go places and have fun—that men adore and are dazzled by. No man likes a dull, nervous girl who tires easily and gets cranky!

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The Pony Express

Diversified interests—

Dear Editor:

Just a few lines to let you know what a fine magazine ROMANTIC RANGE is. I have been reading it for quite a while and the longer I read it, the better I like it.

I would appreciate it very much if you would insert a request for pen pals in the Pony Express section. I am very much interested in America and would like pen pals from every State. I'm interested in stamps, travelling, radio and general topics. Would prefer letters from the fair sex between the age of 20 and 27 years. Snaps appreciated.

Hoping to see this in print in the near future and wishing your magazine every success, I remain, Yours faithfully, Arch. Dabelstein, Laidly, Queensland, Australia.

Are you on the list?

Dear Editor:

Will you please publish this request for pen pals? I wish to hear from those in Oregon and Washington and the Eastern States, but everyone is welcome.

I'm 21, 5 ft. 11½" tall, and weigh 160 pounds. Have brown eyes and hair, square Irish chin. I was reared on a large cattle ranch in New Mexico. I don't think there is any phase of the life of a real cowboy I don't know. I have travelled extensively and promise interesting letters.—Calvin Locke, Route 7, Box 600, Sacramento, California.

Write to Tom—

Dear Editor:

Does anybody want to read letters about the Zulus, Indian fire-walking, and hundreds of other breath-taking truths about "dark Africa"? Well, if so, here's your chance. Write to Tom Wallett and get it all first hand.

I'm 6 ft. tall, and mighty tough. I've toured most of the Union and can tell you fine tales of snakes, wild animals and bush life. You'll hear of adventures on the Transvaal Gold Reef as well; so drop a line to your prospective pen friend.—Tom Wallett, 26 Crart Avenue, Durban, Natal, South Africa.

Not bad on the eyes—

Dear Editor:

I wonder if I could join your merry crowd of saddle pards. I'm a wee Scotch lassie from Glasgow. My height is 5 ft. 2" and my eyes are smoky blue, with dark brown curly hair. My friends consider me not bad on the eyes.

I would like pen pals from all over. The more I get the better I'll be pleased. I'm 18 years of age and I'll correspond with everyone who writes. I'll tell all about the Empire Exhibition and will send photos to the first 99 who write. So here's hoping I won't be kept waiting long.—Sally Murray, 141 Earl Street, Scotstown, Glasgow, Scotland.

Story tellers!

Dear Editor:

Here are two British soldiers, stationed thousands of miles away from the dear old country under the blazing sun of the desert, and simply pining to get onto your page.

Paddy Whyte, my pal, a big blond Irishman, and myself, tall dark and of French extraction, we've spent a good few years out in this "mysterious East" and could we tell a few stories!

We would like very much to hear from some of your readers, especially the fair ones; so come on, girls, we promise a snap in each reply and would like the same from you.—W. E. Whyte and Pte. J. Ourneaux, R.A.M.C., Navy House, Port Said, Egypt.

Betty would like to travel—

Dear Editor:

Please print my plea for pen pals? I only started reading ROMANTIC RANGE a little while ago and think it's swell.

I'm 20 years old. Weigh 120 pounds, and am 5 ft. 7". Have blond hair and blue eyes and I'm not considered bad looking. Like almost anything, mostly singing. Would like to travel.

I would like to hear from Alaska, France, India, Texas, New York, Scotland, and all the faraway places. Also like to hear from some cowgirls and cowboys. Will swap snaps, postcards or what have you. So here's hoping I get swamped with letters.—Betty Gibbs, 205 Park Row, Woodstock, Ontario, Canada.

Lonesome British soldier—

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading my first ROMANTIC RANGE and I enjoyed it immensely. I'm a lonesome soldier of the British Army, and a wireless operator. My age is 22, and am 5 ft. 7" tall. Have fair hair and blue eyes.

I would like to hear from any one who would

care to write to a soldier. So please girls and boys, hurry up and write. It doesn't matter as to the age or sex. I promise to answer them all promptly and will enclose a photo to all who write. So I hope you will print this plea for me.—Signalman Arthur Mole, "B" Corps, Royal Corps of Signals, Karachi, India.

Calling: Iliff, Colorado

Dear Editor:

Won't you please squeeze me in a corner of your column? I'm a girl of 25, and have medium brown hair, gray-green eyes and stand about 5 ft. 3"; weigh about 100 pounds. Not bad looking and enjoy most all sports.

I would especially like to hear from some one living in Iliff, Colorado. But anyone from the West is welcome: soldiers, aviators, lumberjacks, ranchers—not barred.

Wishing you and ROMANTIC RANGE lots of success—Sarah Iliff, Walley Road, New Canaan, Connecticut.

Will exchange snapshots—

Dear Editor:

Won't you please find a place in your column for me? I'm a girl of 18, and have brown hair and hazel eyes and a fair complexion. I'm 5 ft. 2" and weigh 110 pounds.

I like all sports, especially skating and dancing. I'd like to hear from everybody regardless of the sex or age. Will exchange snapshots with first ten who write. So hurry.—Mary Vitalo, 3641 South Rockwell Street, Chicago, Illinois.

Request printed—

Dear Editor:

Am a constant reader of ROMANTIC RANGE. I do hope this entitles me to a chance of getting in line for the Pony Express plea for friends. I would greatly appreciate seeing my plea in the future edition of your magazine.

In case I'm one of the lucky ones, I have made up a request which I hope to see soon in your magazine. Is anyone interested in me? I'm 21 and stand 5 ft. high and weigh about 102 pounds. My eyes are brown and my hair is reddish. I like just about anything and am interested in hearing from you lonely people near and far. My real hobby is writing, so let me assure you one and all that all letters will be promptly answered. So come and let a little French girl be your friend.—Almeda Rivest, 645 McKinstry Avenue, Aldenville, Massachusetts.

Are you a collector?

Dear Editor:

I have been reading ROMANTIC RANGE for a long time and think it's a swell magazine.

I'm 23, 5 ft. 7" tall, and have auburn hair and blue grey eyes. My hobbies are collecting stamps and post marks from all over the world. Would like to hear from other collectors, although everyone is welcome.

I'm lonesome and love to receive mail. I'll do my best to answer all.—Lillian Tate, 832 Bay View Avenue, Wilmington, California.

An Irishman calls—

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your wonderful magazine ROMANTIC RANGE for quite a while, and as far as I can see, we Irish are badly represented in your Pony Express section. So what are the chances of a young Irishman in trying to steal a few Yankee pen pals?

I'm a young apprentice in the Irish Air Corps with big ambitions. I'm 18, and stand 5 ft. 10½", and weigh 152 pounds. I have brown hair, hazel eyes, a good figure, and have been told that I'm quite good looking. I'm interested in all sports. Basketball, football, and swimming. My favorite hobbies are dancing, photography and model aircraft building.

I will exchange snapshots with all who write, so come on all you boys and girls, men and women from any and every part of the world. An Irishman calls.—James A. Campbell, Apprentices Hostel, Baldonnell Camp, Co. Dublin, Ireland.

Who are the lucky ⅓?

Dear Editor:

Well, this is my second letter to you. I would like to get on the Pony Express. Your stories are real good and I also read every letter in the Pony Express. I will be 19, and am 5 ft. 11" tall. Have blond curly hair and blue eyes, and weigh 152 pounds. I like dancing, movies and singing. Also automobiling, reading, writing, baseball and listening to the radio.

I live on a nice farm not far from the city, and will be going to New York City in the fall. I would like to get letters from girls and boys in the cities. I also like to exchange post cards and snapshots with at least one-third of the girls and boys who write to the Pony Express. Hope I hear from some one soon.—Anthony Frank Bladnikar, R.F.D. No. 2, Box 115, Forest City, Pennsylvania.

Sport fan—

Dear Editor:

Please find me a little space in your Pony Express. I have been reading your ROMANTIC RANGE for a long time now and think it's swell.

I have quite a bit of spare time and I read every cowboy book I can lay my hands on. I'm 18 and have brown hair, brown eyes and am 5 ft. 5" tall. I am very fond of all outdoor sport and I collect movie-star photos.

I want pen pals between 17 and 23, anywhere in America, especially cowboys or rangers. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots with everyone who writes. I can tell quite a lot of very interesting things about New Zealand; so come on, pards, and let's see what you can do.—Rona Bull, 10 Exford Street, Trimaru, South Island, New Zealand.

Pretty girls preferred—

Dear Editor:

We are two lonely boys who want comrades from all over the world. We have travelled all over the States. We have done anything from punching cows to working as deck hands on board boats. We are both 18, and stand 5 ft. 9", and both weigh 150 pounds. I'm Tex McIntyre and my hobbies are spinning rope and stamp collecting.

My friend is Al Kirwan, and his hobbies are hunting and football. We are both expert horsemen and will gladly exchange snapshots. We can tell some true adventures. We would like to hear from some pretty gals from around Wyoming, although we would like to hear from anybody from anywhere. So let's see you fill our mail boxes.—Tex McIntyre, and Al Kirwan, 1192nd Co., U.S. C.C.C. Stafford Springs, Connecticut.

A natural weakness!

Dear Editor:
Here's hoping you can find room for me in your column. I'm a young man 20 years old, green eyes, sandy hair, and am 5 ft. 10" tall. Am fairly well built and considered good looking.

I will exchange snapshots with everyone. I play the piano and the accordion and do quite a bit of singing. My hobbies are dancing, golf, tennis and baseball. My weakness is beautiful girls.

I would like to hear from pretty girls between the age of 17 and 21. I hope you pals sling some ink this way.—Larry Richter, 3710 North Oketo Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Fill that mailbox—

Dear Editor:
I would like very much for you to publish this in the Pony Express. Come on all youse guys and gals, write to a lonesome female. I'm 25, and weigh 115 pounds. Have dark brown hair and eyes and am French and Irish. I love horseback riding, movies, dancing, and to write letters.

Please won't a lot of you write? I want to hear from sailors, cowboys and everyone who cares to write. Promise to answer all letters. Hurry now, start pushing that pen, for I will be watching my mailbox every day. Will send a snapshot to the first ten.—Mary-Lou Moretti, 2421 Redondo Beach Boulevard, Redondo Beach, California.

Wanted: women folk (35)

Dear Editor:
As a reader of your fine magazine, will you please admit my little paragraph in your Pony Express department? I would like to exchange interesting letters with the women folks about my age, 35, and whose interests are similar. Mine are radio, good music, camping, fishing, hiking, gardening, stamps, general topics and sports.

I live in the interior of Northern British Columbia. This district is a wilderness of big timbers, lakes and rivers, with an occasional cattle ranch and a few gold mines.

The summers are short and hot, and the winters are long and sub-zero. The forest is full of big game and very seldom an evening goes by without wolves howling in the timber.

I get my mail every second week, as I teach my boy (8 years) by the Government Correspondence Courses. I have started my boy collecting stamps, so I would be pleased to exchange with folks interested in this hobby.

In conclusion, may I wish you the best of luck for ROMANTIC RANGE and for a continuation of fine stories.—Mrs. R. Schafer, 9 Mile Ranch, Quesnel, British Columbia, Canada.

The fleet's in!

Dear Editor:
I'm 5 ft. 10" tall, have coal black wavy hair, deep brown eyes and considered handsome. I'm a first-class fireman with two years' service in the U. S. Navy. My last cruise has taken me halfway around the world.

Among the many ports I visited were: Singapore, Australia, China, Philippines, and at present my ship is anchored at Pearl Harbor, Oahu, Hawaii.

I'm a fairly good dancer and enjoy most sports. I will be very willing to exchange photos, and promise to answer all letters from those who are interested in writing.

I'm an ardent reader of ROMANTIC RANGE. —Peter Defa, U. S. S. Trenton, c/o Postmaster, San Diego, "B Div.", California.

We wish to acknowledge letters from the following:

Claude Cunneen, 125 Sawyers Arms, Road Papanui, N.W. 4, Christchurch, New Zealand.
Lavernne Claire, Frenchburg, Kentucky.
Mildred Sharpe, Route 2, Box 18, El Dorado, Arkansas.
Sayde Wheeler, Booneville, Mississippi.
Jean Brumley, Booneville, Mississippi.
Monica Wilkie, 20 College Street, City, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia.
Fred Kastner, Jr., 442 Madison Street, Carlstadt, New Jersey.
Lorna McIntyre, Telephone Exchange, Aye, N'th, Queensland, Australia.
Fredrick R. Colemon, U.S.S. Chester, c/o Postmaster, New York, N. Y.
Joyce Feakins, 217 Gull Street, New Plymouth, New Zealand.
Horace Cave, 189 Grey Street, Claudelands, Hamilton, New Zealand.
Walter Bean, 2412 Kibby Road, Jackson, Michigan.
Rose Daniels, 10 West Main Street, Macungie, Pennsylvania.
Miriam Livingston, Dryden, Ontario, Canada.
Harold Noel, Challenge Ranger Station, Challenge, California.
Ellis Crucy, Route No. 1, Marion, Virginia.
Helen Wilson, 227 Marble Street, Rockmart, Georgia.
Aileen Young, 160 Peel Street, North Tamworth, New South Wales, Australia.
Miss Glenister Sickels, Box 43, Payette, Idaho.
Leona Trudel, Crystal Falls, Ontario, Canada.
Sarah Berry, 314 Cortland Avenue, Highland Park, Michigan.
Edna Weibrecht, Box 55, Salem, West Virginia.
Johnny McKnight, Pascola, Missouri.
Helen Baird, R.R. No. 2, Rantoul, Illinois.
Dorothy Miller, 215 Cliff Street, Johnstown, Pennsylvania.
Wallis Ward, Route No. 1, Chadbourn, North Carolina.
John Ward, Route No. 1, Chadbourn, North Carolina.
Josephine McKown, c/o L. D. Neber, Route No. 1, Newark, New Jersey.
Harry Rupelt, Camp Gibbs, Co. No. 3604, Iron River, Michigan.
Richard Hudson, Camp Gibbs, Co. No. 3604, Iron River, Michigan.
Oscar Edmondson, 500 Howard Avenue, Tarboro, North Carolina.
Rita McKenzie, 773 Beatty Street, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
Katherine Laverty, 89 Ontario Street, Stratford, Ontario, Canada.
Mary Bainbridge, 24 Robert Street, Hampstead Road, London, N.W. 1, England.
Joan Miller, 283 Fitzroy Street, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada.
Margaret Martin, 24 Ambrose Street, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada.
Joy Carroll, Batesford, via Geelong, Victoria, Australia.
Norma Snyder, 709 Rex Avenue, N.E., Canton, Ohio.
Winnifred McNaney, 121 North Street, West Somerville, Massachusetts.
Leslie Lawson, c/o Kanieri, P.O. vie Hokitika, South Island, New Zealand.
Agnes Nielsen, Bateman's Bay, South Coast, New South Wales, Australia.
Will Nielsen, Bateman's Bay, South Coast, New South Wales, Australia.
Ruth Yolande Holmes, East Coulee, Alberta, Canada.
Dorothy Nisbitt, 3023 West End Avenue, Nashville, Tennessee.
Edith Needham, General Delivery, Sarasota, Florida.

Martin's thumb found the hammer——

LASSOED LOVE

Serena's love lay doomed to die—amidst a gun battle of hate and fury——

by Marian O'Hearn

LEANING from the saddle, Rod Martin squinted through the moonlight to read the words printed on the white gate posts. "The Curley Q."

Beyond was a yard jammed with buckboards and waiting ponies. The ranch house was blazing with lights, and a violin blared its thin laughter above the sounds of gay voices and dancing feet.

"But the Crossed Bones is still two hours away," Martin told himself and lifted the reins to send his tired pony up-trail.

The tough little horse headed for the deep shadow, cast by twin rows of cottonwoods; but something stirred in the darkness and Martin snapped back on the reins. His hands loosened, ready for his gun—as two horsemen rode out of the gloom, their Colts already leveled.

"Howdy, stranger," one of them murmured. "Going any place special?"

Martin let the reins slide through his fingers. "Yeah. The Crossed Bones in Skeleton Valley."

The first waddie gestured with his

gun. "Turn around and ride into the yard. Don't try any smart play, either. Somebody wants to talk to you."

Rod's glance knifed into his and then flicked toward the other man who was waiting with grim watchfulness, weapon steadily trained on his heart. He nodded and wheeled his pony into the yard.

"Around to the side door, stranger. We're not spoiling the boss' party."

They nudged him inside, through a hall, and ushered him into an office.

One of the riders entered with him. "Mac's going for the boss. Just take it easy, partner, and"—he swayed forward, sweeping Rod's gun from its leather sheath—"I'll keep this."

The door opened noiselessly. A man stood on the threshold, regarding Martin with eyes which were clear and hard as bright blue marbles. A young man, stockily built, with a fair face and heavy, sun-bleached eyebrows. Rod waited silently, his body tensing into balance.

But the other grinned and strode across the room.

"Howdy, stranger. I'm Dan Cannon—the owner of this spread. Sorry you got such a funny welcome."

He put out his hand, his grin widening, but Rod ignored the gesture. "Yeah, I'm waiting to hear the answer."

The rancher dropped his arm, but the grin remained. "Sit down. There isn't time to tell you the whole story, but we've been having a little trouble in this district. More than one professional gun-toter's come in to help the Porter outfit in their private war; so we're just trying to keep out any more lead throwers."

"That got anything to do with me?"

Cannon shrugged. "Might have. The boys tell me you're heading for the Crossed Bones, the outfit the Porters are fighting."

"Heard there was some sort of ruction."

"The trouble started more than a year ago over rustled cattle. Now both outfits start shooting every time they get together. Then Cal Porter's son turned bad, rode for the owlhoot trail, and began to raid his own father's ranch. Cal thinks the Crossed Bones is paying him to break up the High T."

Rod reached into his breast pocket and brought out cigarette makings. "That's plenty interesting because I'm on my way to the Crossed Bones to take over the foreman's job."

CANNON stopped in the act of rolling a smoke and the cigarette crumpled between his fingers.

"Foreman? That means Bill Vance must have sent you."

"Yeah. I ran into him down Chula Vista way and he said he couldn't find a good foreman—offered big pay and I took it."

"He sent you, alone? Does that mean he's not coming back?"

"Not for some time. Says he may stay away a year. But I'd like to know more about the Porters."

Cannon did not speak at once. His eyes were stabbing into Rod's and his mouth seemed to loosen. "They're tough and they're killers," he said at last. "Got the idea they're fighting the world and they won't stop at anything."

"Even each other—from what you say."

Cannon nodded and Rod got to his feet. "In that case, I'd better get out to the Crossed Bones and—I'll need my gun."

"Sure." Cannon handed it over. "But why don't you take a look at the party? I'll put you up for the night. That's a tough trip to the

Crossed Bones when you're already tired."

Once more Rod's glance held that of the rancher. "Might be a good idea at that. Guess I will."

"Fine. Now maybe I can show you we're not looking for trouble, but just trying to protect ourselves."

With a hand on Rod's shoulder, he led the way into the front part of the house where the big dining and living rooms had been cleared for dancing. The floor was crowded with gaudily attired young men, and girls wearing gay, light frocks. And as Martin paused in the hall, a bearded fiddler hopped onto a chair and shouted: "The next is a waltz, folks—and after that we'll have a square dance. Grab your partners for the waltz."

The crowd milled together, laughing; the fiddler snapped his bow across the strings and sent a piercing shriek of sound through the room.

But abruptly, the music stopped and silence dropped over the room—a silence as startling as the crash of a gun. The dancers turned to face the door.

A girl had entered and was standing just inside the room. A girl who was like the range by moonlight—her beauty vivid, yet elusive; wistful and startling. Her small, straight body was dressed in a frothy frock of blue which made her skin seem clear pale gold. Color glowed hotly in her rounded cheeks and her mouth was the tint of dark wine. Brown hair with the tone of rich earth waved about her head and clung to her slim neck, but—Rod Martin was aware only of her eyes, for they seemed to be looking directly into his in spite of the space between them. And they were as darkly mysterious, as alive as the night shadows of the hills.

She glanced at the staring crowd and, her smile widening, started toward Cannon.

"Hello Dan"—putting out a small hand. "I decided to come to your party—even without an invitation. Parties are too scarce to overlook."

"Don't say without an invitation, Serena. I sure sent you one, but maybe my boys don't like to get within gun range of your spread."

"Maybe not," she laughed and her head tilted back. "And maybe I'd better not let Dad know I got in range of this place."

Cannon's face lost the dark color that had flooded it. "Doesn't your father know you came, Serena? If he doesn't——"

"That's that," she broke in. "Now, I wonder why someone doesn't ask me to dance."

The fiddler, aroused, crashed his bow over his instrument again, and called: "This here dance is still on, folks; got to finish it up."

SLOWLY, the couples moved together again, but there was no movement from any of the partnerless men lining the far end of the room. The girl laughed again, softly.

"Doesn't look as if the men of the country are dying to dance with me, Dan, which sort of puts it up to you——"

Rod moved as if controlled by a force outside of himself, thrusting

his way through the crowd, to the girl's side.

"In my part of the country we don't bother with introductions at parties, ma'am. So, maybe you'd dance with me?"

Her dark eyes lifted, startled, and for part of a second, they looked at each other like that. A strange, tense moment—as if both realized they would always remember this first touch of glances. Then she smiled and the tenseness which had been on her mouth disappeared.

"Yes, I'd like to," she said in that low, sure voice. "Introductions aren't customary in the Skeleton country either."

"This place needs a new name," Rod said, taking her into his arms. "Since you live here, it shouldn't be called the Skeleton."

"What would you suggest?" She said the words with a laugh that was low and warm in her throat.

"I'd call it Paradise."

"You *are* a stranger," she said, and the gaiety left her face. "I'd better introduce myself, after all. I'm Serena Porter from the High T Ranch."

His eyes remained on hers, but she must have read the swift surprise in them, for her mouth curved into a hard, smiling challenge. "Yes, my father is Cal Porter and my brother is Lute Porter and he's supposed to have turned outlaw. At least, that's what people will tell you —and sooner or later you'll probably believe it."

"That's not true, ma'am. I'll never believe anything except what you tell me. "That's a bargain, starting right this minute."

The dark eyes widened and their depths were like shadows over fire. "Don't make a bargain like that. You might wish you hadn't."

"Never."

A new warmth flowed up into her cheeks. "You haven't told me who you are or why you're so sure of—things like that."

"I'm Rod Martin."

"Are you staying in the Skeletons or just visiting here?"

"I'm staying——" He paused, but reading the waiting in her eyes, forced himself to go on. "Tomorrow I become foreman of the Crossed Bones Ranch."

She stopped and her arms dropped to her sides, the color suddenly blotted from her young face. "Then Bill Vance sent you to handle the Crossed Bones while he hides; while he——"

She broke off and whirled away; but she was claimed at once by Dan Cannon who appeared as suddenly as if he had been waiting.

Martin returned to the hall but his glance kept straying to Serena. She was talking to Cannon as they danced and once her small hand tightened on his arm with desperate appeal.

The rancher shook his head, his face almost grim. Rod tore his gaze away, fighting off a rush of furious anger. Then the music stopped, sending the crowd toward the doors. He wandered out to the side porch for a smoke.

THAT GIRL was Serena Porter. Rod knew all about the outlaw brother, Lute, for Vance had told him what to expect on the Crossed Bones. A wild, fast-shooting rider of the outlaw trail—who had put himself outside the law to destroy his own father. And the father, equally grim, carrying on a ruthless warfare against the Crossed Bones—on which he placed all responsibility for his son's wrongdoing.

The murmur of low voices cut into Martin's thoughts, shattering

the picture of Serena Porter's elusive loveliness. But one of the voices was hers, and she was saying: "You've got to listen to me, Dan. I have to know the truth——"

"And I won't say any more, Serena. You were crazy to come to-night. If your father finds out, he'll bring the outfit over, shooting. Let's go inside. This isn't doing any good."

Once more Rod checked a fierce impulse to comfort the rancher and give him a lesson in manners.

A girl like that: moonlight and hill shadows and all the vibrant beauty of life, pleading with a man, only to be brushed aside! But they were moving away, their voices fading, and Rod told himself grimly: "I don't like this spread well enough to spend the night. I'm forking my bronc out of here."

He stepped off the porch and went to the corrals, where he saddled his pony.

But as he walked his mount past the house, he jerked to a hard halt and dropped to the ground. A gun had roared from the other side of the building, and as he hit the earth, it barked again. A man standing below the front steps staggered and dropped.

Rod, on his knees, flipped up his Colt just as a buckboard shot around the house and hurtled toward the gates, the whip cracking wildly. Martin's thumb found the hammer—but his arm lowered. For as the buckboard turned, the moonlight flashed on a frothy blue dress. Serena Porter had been wearing a dress like that.

He waited until the carriage fled through the gates and a storm of sound broke from the house as the guests poured into the yard.

A man shouted above the turmoil: "Get back and let me handle this. I'm still sheriff of this county."

Rod stood up and a hand clamped on his arm. "How'd you happen to be here just now—with your iron out?"

It was the waddie who had first taken him, at gun-point, to the Curley Q.

Martin looked into the grim face and then glanced at the gates. The buckboard had disappeared.

"I heard a gun go off and was aiming on doing a little lead-throwing myself, just in case."

"Yeah? Well, in this case you're going to do some talking. Amble over here."

He nodded toward the milling crowd, and still gripping Rod's arm, forced open a path to where a man was kneeling over a still form on the ground. It was Dan Cannon and one side of his body was covered with blood.

"BRING some whisky!" the sheriff called.

But the rancher stirred, opened his eyes and pulled himself up onto his uninjured elbow. "What's this about? Did that——" Then consciousness completely returned; his words stopped and his face closed. "Help me up, and forget about this. Just got a slug through the shoulder. Doesn't amount to anything—probably one of my loco rannies celebrating by shooting at the clouds."

He lurched to his feet, but the sheriff stopped him. "Listen, Dan, we know none of your rannies threw a bullet into you. And I was standing in the doorway, looking out, when it happened. Somebody pulled down on you. I couldn't see anybody, but a second later a buckboard lit out of here like it was burning leather for hell, and driving it——"

"You're crazy." Cannon's uninjured hand dropped onto the sheriff's shoulder, the fingers digging into

the flesh. "Don't shoot off your mouth like that just because you're a lawman."

"I know what I saw, Dan."

"You don't know anything, and I'm not having loose talk thrown around here to cause trouble. Now" —he turned his back on the sheriff and called—"get the party going again. I'll change my shirt and be right with you."

There was a short, nervous gust of laughter and the crowd moved uneasily toward the house. Rod, beside the Curley Q rannie, was watching Dan Cannon. He was sure that the rancher knew Serena Porter had driven away in the racing buckboard.

"I guess," he murmured to the waddie, "that kind of settles your act, too."

"Maybe. But be careful around this place. It'll be healthier."

Rod went back to his waiting pony and, swinging up, headed over Black Gorge trail which wove crookedly into Skeleton Valley. But once away from the Curley Q, he left the trail to cut across range. If his mount could stand the rougher going, he ought to reach Black Gorge before Serena Porter's buckboard passed. And he wanted to know about the Cannon shooting.

When his worn little horse reached the mouth of Black Gorge Canyon, he turned into a blind branch. Less than ten minutes passed before he heard the sound for which he was listening. But no—this was not the rumbling of a racing buckboard; this was the noise of two pairs of hoofs. He drew farther into the shadows and waited with his eyes straining at the trail.

The first horse came into view at

"How did you find out my father was away?"

an even, unhurried pace—a big horse, beautifully sleek and long-legged. And in the saddle was a man with a neckerchief masking his face. A lean, hard-looking man with a gun at either thigh.

Then Rod saw the second pony. A smaller, but equally strong-looking horse, and riding him was Serena Porter. They passed and a moment later the sound of their hoofs stopped as suddenly as if a door had closed after them. Rod waited for seconds to pass before stepping out onto the trail. By that time neither rider was in sight.

"Which means there's another branch a little farther on—and not a blind one," he told himself. "Guess I won't find out anything from Serena Porter—tonight or any other time."

Stepping up, he wheeled his pony and rode out of the canyon to travel across-range once more. And as he drove his horse into a faster pace, anger began to flare through him.

Serena Porter had left the Curley Q in a buckboard, but appeared here on a pony, riding with a masked man who was probably the outlaw brother.

"After shooting Cannon, she drove to where she knew she'd find a pony. And her brother was waiting for her, which means——"

But he stopped his own thoughts and flicked his quirt against his mount's flanks, for he was seeing Serena as she had been an hour before—breathtaking as the high range by moonlight.

THE SUN was still red with sunset when Serena Porter rode toward the Indian Walk foothills just above Black Gorge Canyon. Her pony was strong and long-legged. She was dressed in mannish blue jeans, flannel shirt and boots; an old, floppy Stetson kept her face in shadow, and at her throat was a neckerchief of dark, solid blue. There was a gunbelt around her waist, a long weapon in a holster at her thigh. Her body was tensely erect in the saddle, her dark eyes searching the edge of the foothills. Once, she drew in and looked nervously back in the way she had come; then she went on, at a walk, still watching the edge of the foothills. And finally, there was the signal for which she was waiting—the flash of a white handkerchief. As she rode toward it, a man stepped out from the dense brush at the foot of the slope.

"Hello, Lark," she said, gravely. "I was afraid you weren't coming."

"So was I. Your father seemed suspicious—almost as if he knew something. Acted like he wanted to keep me in sight every minute."

"Will the others be able to meet us tonight?"

"Yeah. I sent word to three riders on the flats. All of 'em will be here," the foreman of the High T said. "But I think it's crazy, the way we're going at it, ma'am. Why should we act like outlaws? We've got a right to find out who's trying to wreck the High T and it'd be safer to do it right out in meeting."

"Safer, maybe, but we wouldn't get any place. If people think there's an outlaw gang operating in the Skeletons, we'll have a better chance."

Lark lifted his broad shoulders in a gesture of defeat. "If your father finds out what we're doing——"

"He won't; but we can't worry about that now. I'll be expecting you tonight."

She wheeled her pony and started south for Black Gorge trail. At the edge of the range was a tall wall of mesquite and she slowed her mount's

pace to send him through it. But, suddenly it broke apart; her father stepped through the brush, his eyes a black blaze.

"Serena, I've been worrying about you lately, but I didn't figure on this. Who was that man?"

The girl's hands went lax on the reins and she looked down at her father's furious face. Cal Porter was a big, gauntly built man to whom the past months had given a look of drawn thinness.

"Dad——"

"Shut up and answer me! Who was it?"

She met his eyes squarely. "I can't tell you."

"You can't tell me——" Porter's voice lifted into a roar; he stepped forward to catch her pony's head leather.

"Get down. You'll tell me—because I know——"

"Dad, please——"

But he dragged her from the saddle, his hands crushing her slim shoulders. "So all the time you've been playing this game—working with an outlaw and thief who turned against his own father! Maybe you help him——"

"Dad!" Serena straightened under her father's heavy hands and her voice snapped like the crack of a gun. She looked at him with her head thrust back and her mouth scornful. "If you believe Lute is an outlaw, then I'm sorry for you."

"Believe it? What else can I believe? You're seeing him, and you know what he is or you wouldn't be afraid to tell me!"

"But I haven't. That wasn't Lute."

"You——"

A VOICE spoke from behind Serena. A low-pitched, easy voice. "No reason for the excitement. Serena came to meet me. Don't know why she didn't want to tell you."

The girl turned slowly, almost bracing herself to face Rod Martin. He was standing a few feet below them, as if he, too, had been watching the trail. And as his eyes met hers, there was a commanding signal in their gray depths. There had been a message in them the night before, too—a different kind of message.

"Howdy, Mister Porter." He moved toward them, his long stride unhampered by his high-heeled boots or by the heavy gun at his thigh.

He took off his hat and the light showed the healthy crispness of his brown hair, the straight line of his nose, and the sure molding of his mouth and chin.

Cal Porter was rigid. "Who'm I saying howdy to? Why were you meeting Serena?"

"I wanted to talk to her."

"Who are you?"

Martin's face changed and his eyes became strangely still. "I'm Rod Martin, new foreman of the Crossed Bones. Just got here last night."

Cal Porter moved so suddenly that he seemed to lunge. "Foreman of the Crossed Bones? Bill Vance sent you here—and you're working like this! After getting in last night, you meet my daughter this morning and——"

His words rushed together and his hand dropped to his gun, swinging it up. "Bill Vance's gun throwers don't have anything to do with me or mine, hombre, except when they're stealing stock or paying my own children to work against me. Draw so's I can let daylight through you without making it murder."

Martin did not move. "I'm foreman of the Crossed Bones and I don't know anything of gun throwers. Nothing strange about a man

wanting to know a girl like your daughter—and we won't start swapping lead."

"Won't we?" Porter's thumb fumbled at the hammer of his Colt and Serena caught his arm.

"Don't, Dad," she half-sobbed. "We've got enough trouble without this." Keeping in front of her father, she twisted to face Martin. "Get out, quick. You don't have to explain meeting me. Nobody from the Crossed Bones outfit will ever need to do that."

His eyes, still quiet, met hers, and held them. Then he nodded. "All right, ma'am, if that's how you want it."

He turned back into the brush and Serena's father jerked around to look after him, but made no attempt to level his gun again. Nor did he speak until the slap of hoofs sounded from the trail. Then he said: "That's a buckeroo with bullet-proof nerves—the first one to ever hook up with the Crossed Bones."

Serena got back into the saddle. "I'm going home, Dad. Riding with me?"

He looked at her wearily, all his anger gone. "Yes, I'll go along. My pony's just below."

She rode through the brush; a moment later he moved into place beside her. "I went pretty loco for a minute, Serena. I've been worried about you, lately. After I heard you'd gone to the party at the Curley Q last night, I thought I'd better keep an eye on you. But"—he paused and darted a swift glance at her—"I've been doing some thinking, too. You're a girl and it's only natural you'd be interested in some one man. If it's Dan Cannon, you don't need to hide it. I've got nothing against him even if we had a few run-ins."

Serena's dark eyes widened. "Dad—there's nothing like that. I—wanted to go to the party, but I'm not in love with Dan."

Once more his face turned grim. "That's up to you, but I'm giving you the facts. Cannon's all right, but don't get ideas about a lead-throwing buckaroo like Martin—or anybody connected with the Crossed Bones."

Serena laughed. "Lead throwing? He wouldn't even draw when you threatened to kill him."

"Maybe not, but I know a gun handler when I see one. Bill Vance sent him here to finish wrecking me and the High T because he got too scared to go through with it himself."

She did not speak and they rode the rest of the way in silence. At the ranch she prepared supper and then went to her room to wait for the slow hours to pass.

At last she could hear only the stamp of hoofs from the corrals, the slap of a door, the sound of her father's footsteps going to his bedroom. Finally, she walked noiselessly from her room to the rear door; ran for the northern end of the yard; where, beside the low fence separating yard from the range, a pony waited. Swinging up, she jumped him across the fence and lifted her quirt. Half a mile from the High T she pulled her blue neckerchief up over her face and began to circle back toward Black Gulch Canyon.

SERENA and Tom Lark, the High T foreman, led the five riders out of the canyon, just as the moon edged up into the sky. At the Indian Walk foothills they swung west toward the Paint Hill Range of the Crossed Bones. And on the lip of the rich grassland the girl gestured toward the night riders guarding the

herd. "Two men," she said. "Circle around and tie them up until we're through."

The men swung their ponies and rode back through the brush. Serena, waiting beside Lark, saw ropes snaking through the air to jerk the surprised Crossed Bones waddies from their saddles before they could even attempt to draw. In a matter of minutes they were tied and helpless on the ground, while the High T riders went to work. They cut out steers, roped and examined their brand, releasing the animals as soon as they saw they did not bear a blotted High T mark. Months before, rustled stock had actually been traced to the Crossed Bones range by a special deputy whom Cal Porter had demanded. The deputy, an ex-ranger, proved that the stampeded stock had made a clear, unmistakable trail to Crossed Bones range. But there the trail had ended, for there was no further sign of the rustled cattle. No blotted brands, no single animal mixed with the stock of the suspected ranch—no suspicious sales or shipments. Nothing. And yet, the cattle had plainly been driven onto Crossed Bones land. The authorities had finally dropped the whole matter, insisting that the rustling had been handled by outlaws—one of whom might be Serena's brother, who had left home after a bitter quarrel with his father. Since then there had been constant reports that he had been seen with known outlaws and cattle thieves.

The girl remembered that her brother had been reported working with a rustling gang along the State border.

"But it's not true," she told herself. "Lute's no more an outlaw than I am. The answer's here—but we can't find it!" Turning her pony, she looked over the broad, high rangeland. At the northern end, the mesa ended flush against the side of a taller peak; to the south, less than three miles away, was the Crossed Bones home ranch. For weeks the girl, working with Tom Lark and a few waddies, had been searching for the answer to the mystery of the vanished stock. Once she found that, she could prove Lute had no part in the rustling of his father's cattle.

Far below something was moving swiftly through the moonlight and a moment later Serena realized that a horseman was burning leather toward Paint Hill.

"Somebody's heading up," she called. "We'll ride down the west slope. Let's get started."

The struggling steers were released and the two bound night riders were freed after being stripped of their guns. The waddies stepped into their saddles to pound for the western slope down which their ponies plunged at reckless speed, with Serena and Lark leading the way.

The foreman suddenly swerved his mount toward her, calling: "Your neckerchief's slipped, ma'am."

She put up her hand, but encountered only the collar of her flannel shirt. She had lost the blue neckerchief.

At her gesture Lark jerked a neckerchief from his pocket. She pulled it up over her face and then they swept ahead at an even faster pace, for they would travel miles beyond the High T before separating and returning to the ranch.

Serena turned to look back at the mesa and then stopped. There was a horseman at the edge of the tableland, sitting motionlessly in the saddle, and sharply outlined against the sky—wide shoulders and balanced body—a picture of strength.

"Rod Martin," she whispered to herself. "Maybe he expected us!"

UNEASILY, Serena rode on, quirting her pony after the men, and deciding that for a few days they would make no more night trips to Crossed Bones range. Her mount stretched out to overtake the animals ahead—and then a gun exploded from behind; from the Paint Hill mesa. Swerving her pony as another weapon roared, she heard half a dozen guns speak together. Horses and riders suddenly flashed into view, silhouetted against the sky. One horse slipped and plunged downhill.

"Lark!" Serena cried as the foreman pounded back to her.

"We better take off these masks and go see what's happening," he said, pulling in. "That's real trouble, ma'am, and maybe——"

"No." She cut crisply across his voice. "No, it might be a trick—to get us back; that's all the Crossed Bones outfit would need. Bill Vance notified the whole country that after his ranch had once been suspected of rustling, which couldn't be proven, he wouldn't stand for any further search of his land or inspection of his cattle."

"Still, ma'am—we don't know. We left those two night riders without guns and if they've been jumped by thieves——"

"The only thieves in this country work with the Crossed Bones." But, as she finished speaking, she stared into Lark's eyes. He meant her brother! He, too, believed Lute had stolen and killed!

Her face went still and she straightened in the saddle. "Let's start. Dangerous to stop for so long."

She rode on, but the moonlit night had lost its brilliance for her; suddenly she did not want to leave the mesa and the echo of snapping guns. For, a few minutes ago she had seen a horseman at the edge of the range—a horseman who she was sure was Rod Martin. If he were alone——

She was aware of her own breath against her lips; but she snapped her quirt, urging her mount on, trying not to remember that she had danced with Martin. He had said that Skeleton Valley should be called Paradise—because she lived there.

Easy, trivial words. The sort of thing a man always said to a girl. But his voice had made them important, as if a game of pretense had changed to reality.

"Even if it was Martin I saw on the mesa, he'll be all right," she told herself. But the strained pallor did not leave her face.

THE MOON had set when Serena dropped wearily out of the saddle, a rod away from the home ranch, and led her pony into the yard. Then, after unsaddling, she turned to the house. She stopped, her breath knotting in her throat. There was a light showing from the living-room windows. Which meant that her father had discovered her absence and was waiting for her!

She glanced desperately about the darkness of the yard; then made herself move toward the steps.

Inside, she crossed to the living-room door and braced herself for the outbreak of her father's fury. But the man who pulled himself out of a low chair was—Dan Cannon!

He looked at her with eyes that were brightly blue even in the dim glow of the single oil lamp. "Serena! Your father said you'd gone to bed hours ago."

"Did you come here to see him? I didn't think anything could get

you onto the High T. You've always acted as if Dad was fighting you as well as the Crossed Bones."

"Maybe I did feel that way—for a while. But tonight I'm too worried to care."

"But——" She closed the door and lowered her voice. "What's worrying you enough to send you here?"

"You." He moved toward her and he seemed taller than she remembered.

"Are you telling me that Dad went off to bed and just left you here—without doing anything about a place for you to sleep?"

"No—he was in bed when I arrived, but he insisted on giving me a room; even turned down the covers for me. But I wasn't ready to sleep so I came back downstairs."

"Maybe," she said, her eyes holding his, "you guessed I wasn't asleep—and you might have been waiting for me."

He grinned. "Why should I? I'm not that lucky."

"Dan——" Her voice lifted as she saw the bandages under his thin shirt and realized his arm was held close to his side. "What happened to you?"

"Happened? Oh." His eyes imprisoned her glance. "A little accident at the party last night. Must have been just after you left. Somebody got careless with a shooting iron and I was in the way. You had left, hadn't you?"

"I suppose so, since I didn't know about it."

"Yeah. I'd sort of counted on taking you home, but you didn't even say good-bye."

ONCE MORE Serena was aware of her own breath against her dry lips. Dan's face was too quiet, too waiting.

She moistened her lips nervously. "You seem—strange, tonight. First you said you were here because you were worried, and then——"

"I was worried—about you. With the setup in the Skeleton since Martin's arrived, something's bound to happen. Bill Vance sent him here for a reason. Nobody who knows Vance'd think anything else. And the reason is to finish off the High T."

"Then you think that, too!"

"Everybody does. But still people figure things are about even between your father and the Crossed Bones, and they want to keep out of it. Besides, there seem to be a few outlaws riding this range lately and some people think they were hired by either Bill Vance or the High T."

Serena moved past him and dropped into a chair. "I still don't know why you made this trip."

"Don't you?" He pushed a chair close to hers. "It's pretty simple. There's not another girl like you in the whole West, Serena. I've been wondering how I could smooth things out with your father, but tonight he treated me like a son-in-law."

"Wait a minute, Dan." She sat up with her wine-tinted mouth curving into a grin which brought a dimple to one cheek. "I'm about to say 'please, this is so sudden.' Back up and tell me what you're getting at."

Cannon's blue eyes narrowed, sharpening until they seemed like twin blue blades—and then he shot to his feet.

"I wasn't expecting you to be funny."

"Why"—amazement twisted her words and she, too, got up, struggling against an uneasy new fear—"you'll admit that you've never mentioned anything like this before—al-

though we've known each other a long time."

"What's that got to do with it? Serena." He caught her hands. "A man doesn't say everything he thinks or feels."

But the girl stepped back, with her eyes thoughtful. Last night when she had pleaded for his help he had been almost brusque.

She spoke carefully. "I went to the Curley Q party to ask what you know about my brother. While you were in Golden Bend last month, you told the sheriff there that you'd recognized Lute in a gang of rustlers driving stolen cattle over the State border. The sheriff in Rawhide heard about it and questioned you until you repeated the story."

His eyes flickered away from her and she demanded: "Well? Why did you say that about Lute?"

"Serena." He tried to recapture her hands, but she moved away. "That hasn't anything to do with us. You aren't responsible for your brother or any other member of your family."

"I see." Little lines of scarlet cut across the pallor of her face and turned into fierce flame in her cheeks. "You believe my brother's an outlaw —and you probably agree with people who call my father an old killer. But I know Lute's not an outlaw. He couldn't be—and my father's never shot a man except in a fair fight. The Porters may be tough, but we're clean and——"

"—honest, I suppose?" he broke in, his voice roughening. "Is it honest to do an outlaw's killing for him? To take advantage of being a girl so that it'll be safe to plug a man?"

"WHAT are you talking about?" Serena demanded. "A minute ago you said you cared for me. Now you're accusing me of committing murder—or of helping someone else commit it."

"Listen." Cannon's voice dropped. "Not even what I'm going to say makes any difference. But last night I saw you getting into the buckboard. Then, as soon as two slugs were thrown at me, you drove away. This morning one of my men found your buckboard hidden in the brush above the sand sink not more than a mile from my ranch. It was pretty plain that two horses had ridden away together. Somebody was waiting to hear that I was dead."

The girl's eyes widened as she stared at him. "Somebody! You mean I shot you and then went to meet my brother! You're saying that I'm working with him—as much an outlaw as you believe him to be!"

Dan Cannon moved impatiently. "Maybe I am—but what of it? I told you how I feel. He probably had ways of forcing you to do it for him——"

"Dan!" Her voice rang through his words, and her hand dropped to the gun at her hip. "I didn't shoot you last night, but I will now if you don't get out of this house."

"But Serena——"

She moved the gun and her eyes reflected the glint of the metal. "Get out."

He hesitated, tensing almost as if he would spring at her; but instead he whirled to the door. Only to stop once more.

"If this is what you want, all right; but don't see too much of the Crossed Bones' new foreman because there might be another dead man found on this range."

Serena lifted the Colt and curled her thumb against the hammer. "I met Rod Martin for the first time at your house, and I don't think

there'll be much neighborliness between the Crossed Bones' foreman and anyone on this spread."

"Better remember that."

He jerked the door open and slammed it after him. Then his booted feet thudded down the porch steps and Serena lowered her arm. Drooping with weariness, she made her way upstairs to the cool pleasant room which had been hers as long as she could remember. Dawn was already tinting the night gloom and she paused at the window overlooking the rear of the yard.

A faint sound drifted through the murky darkness. A pony was being walked toward the corrals! She heard the sound of sliding bars, and then the scuff of a man's boot heels as he came toward the house. The footsteps stopped at the rear door and there was the click of a key turning in the lock.

But it was only as the man stepped inside that Serena backed from the windows, realizing the truth. Her father!

"He was hunting for Lute," she told herself. "He really believes Lute is trying to hurt the High T. He went to look for his son because he wanted to trap an outlaw."

ROD MARTIN cantered past the Three Forks and traveled east until he neared the Indian Walk foothills, where he turned into the open range, riding up-slope until he could see the High T ranchyard. Then he pulled in to study the spread. Half a dozen horsemen suddenly poured out of the gates, with Cal Porter at their head.

He waited until they roared past, over the trail, and then rode down to the ranch. Leaving his pony, he entered afoot. There was no sound from shops or bunksheds, which meant that the entire outfit was away.

"That'll make it easier," he told

"Get out!"

himself, and his eyes darkened to the color of smoky slag. When there was no answer to his knock on the ranch-house door, he stepped inside and walked into the living room. It was silent and empty. But as he turned away, he noticed folds of sheer green cloth spilling from a couch onto the floor. Below the crisp green was the outline of slim, girlish legs and small, sandal-shod feet.

He reached the couch in two strides. Serena was asleep, dressed in a morning robe with tiny sleeves that showed her arms, and a skirt that was long enough to conceal even her feet. But her firm-fleshed young face looked too white and the corners of her lips curved wistfully downward.

The grimness which had tightened the muscles of Rod's face disappeared. He turned to leave the room, but suddenly her voice stopped him.

"How did you find out my father was away?" She was sitting up, regarding him through narrowed lashes.

"What does that mean?"

"Just that I wake up and find you here a few minutes after all the men have gone."

His face set into a masklike quiet. He returned to the couch, jerked a chair close to it and sat down.

"I didn't know your father was away. I wanted to have a talk with you—and I hoped I wouldn't have to plug anybody to get it."

"We've done all the talking we need to do—just enough to know you're here to carry out Bill Vance's orders."

"I came to return something to you, ma'am. It's this."

He put his fingers into his breast pocket, pulled out a folded blue neckerchief, and dropped it into her lap. "You left that on Paint Hill Mesa—probably dropped it while your men were running off the cattle."

Serena felt her whole body tense and knew that shocked fear was showing in her eyes. "What are you talking about? Paint Hill Mesa, cattle rustling and a neckerchief!"

"I'm talking about you. Last night you went to Paint Hill Mesa to raid the Crossed Bones herd. Two of my riders were wounded and one of them is going to die. You dropped this neckerchief before you got away."

He saw the fine moisture that sprang out on her forehead and lips. Then her hands touched the neckerchief only to jerk away from it.

"You—you're crazy! What makes you think this is mine?"

"I know it is. I saw you wearing it yesterday afternoon. And"—he put out a hand and lifted the square of blue cloth to his face—"I would have known it anyhow. When I danced with you at the Curley Q party, your hair smelled just like this. I couldn't have forgotten."

"But it's not——"

Serena got to her feet, holding her hands against her sides to stop their shaking.

Rod Martin also stood; he saw the terror struggling in her eyes. A few days before she had danced in his arms while her warm, low laughter had seemed like a gay caress.

"Serena"—his voice was low—"I came here because I wanted to watch your face when I returned that neckerchief. I wanted to look at you while I told you I'd fallen in love with you the first time you smiled at me, only to find out that you were——" He broke off and his hands touched hers, tightened over them fiercely as he went on: "But now I want to help you. No matter what's happened, I'll straighten

things out."

"You can't help me." She spoke simply, without further pretense, and her slim shoulders drooped.

"There's nothing that can't be changed when it has to be. Tell me what's happening; what's driving you into—this. Then I'll know what to do."

She shook her head, and Rod released her hands, caught her shoulders in his hard fingers. "You have to listen to me——"

HIS WORDS halted, and he realized only that she was close to him.

He had not intended to take her into his arms. Not like that—with almost ruthless fierceness. But then she was there, close to him and his mouth was searching for her lips, finding them.

Rod heard nothing during those seconds; knew nothing except that Serena was in his arms. Then, abruptly, she pulled away; and he heard hoofs slapping into the yard.

"If that's my father——"

She ran to the window. "It's two of the riders who left with him. I don't know why they're back because they were going to the Lake Range to see some cattle started south to the shipping pens."

"Shipping cattle—now?"

She nodded. "Dad says he'd rather sell at a loss than let the Crossed Bones steal the stock."

"Is he riding it down?"

"No—three waddies are going to herd. Dad just took the others up in case there was trouble getting away. He always expects trouble."

"But——"

"Look—they're coming to the house! If they see you, they won't let you leave alive. They figure any Crossed Bones man who comes here is hunting trouble. Go through the back door. I'll hold them at the front of the house while you get away."

"No."

"Please." Her hand clamped on his arm. "Please, Rod! If you don't go now, we'll never have a chance to meet again."

"All right." He caught her back into his arms and his mouth crushed down against hers. Then, as booted feet pounded up the front steps, he ran for the rear door.

But as he headed for the Crossed Bones, he was realizing that Serena had returned his kisses; that she had clung to him in swift, honest response. Tomorrow he would see Cal Porter and put all his cards on the table to end the trouble between the High T and the Crossed Bones. If that cost him his job, it wasn't important. He had Serena now and the world had suddenly become simple.

THAT AFTERNOON Martin saw the sheriff and another rider turn into the Crossed Bones ranchyard. He waited for them, his eyes narrowed against the noon sun, his mind still absorbed in the problem of the raid on the Crossed Bones stock.

"Maybe this raid was the same kind as the raids on the High T," he thought. "The stock just disappeared——"

But he shook his head, realizing that the High T stock had been definitely traced to Crossed Bones land before it had completely vanished! The Crossed Bones was a vast spread.

"Howdy, Martin." The sheriff pulled in at the door and Rod realized that the man with him was Dan Cannon. "Thought I'd better get a report on the loss of stock and the shooting of those two boys."

Cannon dropped down. "Hap-

pened to be in town when word of the raid came in. Thought I'd come out and see what could be done."

"Nothing to be done," Rod said, his voice short. "I'll make a report to the sheriff." He led the lawman into the office and gave him the details of the robbery and shooting. But when Meredith left, Cannon was still waiting.

"Not riding back with the sheriff," he said. "Wanted a talk with you."

"Sure." Rod dropped into a chair. "Go ahead."

"I sort of expected something like this raid, Martin. There's a lot of things about the Skeleton Valley you don't understand—that no outsider could know about."

"Maybe—but I know murder and rustling when I see them."

Cannon stood up. "But you'll never learn anything more or why they happened. Men like Cal Porter and Bill Vance don't want the law mixing into their affairs. They'd rather stand up with six-guns and shoot until every man on both outfits is wiped out."

Rod's gaze was inscrutable. "You must figure the High T had something to do with this last raid. In that case, what would you advise doing?"

Cannon strode nervously away only to whirl back. "Yeah, I've got some advice, Martin. Forget the Crossed Bones and find a regular spread to run—one where the business is cattle raising and not killing."

Rod grinned. "Meaning you're telling me to get out?"

"That'd be the smart thing to do."

Rod's grin widened, but the corners of his mouth curled thinly. "You must have a stake in this game yourself."

Cannon seemed to jerk erect. "I don't like wise hombres, especially cowpokes who think they're smart. Sure, I've got a stake in this—and a big one. Serena Porter."

"Say that—again." Rod's voice was measured. Suddenly he was seeing Cannon through a thin, wavering mist and there was fire stabbing at his brain.

"All right." Dan nodded. "My stake is Serena Porter."

Rod's body flashed forward, as if that stab of flame was driving him. His closed fist cut viciously upward and crashed into Cannon's chin, sending him stumbling to the floor.

Rod waited; then the mist left his eyes and the rage began to clear from his brain. He could hear a wild tattooing of hoofs rushing toward the house.

LEAPING for the door, he was outside just as a horse slid to a stop, its coat white, foam dripping from its mouth. Serena Porter was in the saddle.

"Rod!" she cried. "The three men who started south with our cattle were killed two hours ago—shot to death a mile beyond Rawhide."

"Killed?" he uttered, as he helped her dismount. "Before they even

got out of the country?"

"Yes," she said, her voice ragged with sobs. "They shot the boys down—dry-gulched them—and then drove off the stock. They—they hadn't even drawn their guns."

"Serena"—he drew her into his arms—"this isn't just the High T's affair now. A crime like that is the business of every man on the range. I'll get my outfit together and we'll start the hunt. With enough men, we'll get the killers before they even reach the State border."

"Rod." The girl clung to him. "You can't do that—at least not now. My father won't believe that this wasn't done at the orders of Bill Vance or the Crossed Bones. An hour ago he started issuing guns and ammunition to the men and he was ready to ride over here with them—to pay for the boys' deaths with the same number of killings!"

"What stopped him?"

"I did. I made him agree to come here alone or with just one of the men—for a talk. I thought you'd make him see he can't avenge his dead riders until he knows who killed them."

Rod's arms tightened around the girl. "When this is over, you're going to have a different life, Serena, even if I have to take you out of Skeleton Valley by force."

The shadow of a smile moved over her face. "I'll wait up the trail, where I can't be seen," she said, "because I don't want Dad to know I'm here."

She got into the saddle and on the trail turned north so that she could not be seen by anyone traveling from the south.

As Rod turned back to the house, Dan Cannon appeared in the doorway. "Just a minute," Rod murmured, his hand dropping to his gun. "I want to be sure you don't stay too close to the Crossed Bones. Start for your pony, quietlike."

"Things won't be quiet for you very long," the rancher threatened. "I told you my stake in this business and I'll still get it—after you're weighted down with lead."

Martin stepped toward him, caught the gun from his holster and gestured toward the yard. "Get on your horse and ride before I have to put you to sleep again."

As Cannon started for his pony Rod followed him, remaining close behind until he headed down-trail—away from where Serena waited behind the shield of a thick cottonwood clump.

WHEN Cal Porter appeared, he was traveling fast. With him was his foreman, Tom Lark. As soon as they pounded into the yard, Crossed Bones riders hurried toward the gates, easing their holsters against their thighs.

Porter reined in and called: "I've come for a peaceable talk, Martin. If it doesn't work I can get as many guns as you can. Send your rannies away."

But the riders suddenly milled together, as a man, crossing the yard at a run, plunged into them. And then a weapon flashed in the sunlight—and coughed.

"Stop!" Rod shouted. "Get back or——"

But Tom Lark was sliding from his saddle—dropping as heavily as a sand-loaded sack. Cal Porter leaped to the ground, shouting: "Martin, I came here without a gun—so did Lark! But I'll live to fill you with lead."

Rod roared at the Crossed Bones riders: "I'll find the man who did this and he'll be in jail before night. The rest of you know who he is—bring him out!"

A slight, wiry figure suddenly sprang away—running wildly.

Rod's gun barked and the slight man stumbled; then he charged on, heading for a saddled pony waiting on the home range.

Rod's thumb again jerked down on the hammer, but the man was up and wheeling his mount. "Get after him," Rod ordered. "Don't come back until you find him!"

Then, not daring to glance at the cottonwoods where Serena waited, he walked heavily toward Tom Lark, who lay motionless on the ground. Cal Porter was bending over him, fumbling at his wounded chest, feeling for his heartbeat.

"It looks bad," Rod said.

"Bad—— Yeah, it's bad." Porter's voice was taut. "Lark's dead—another murder for the Crossed Bones to chalk up. But by this time tomorrow, Martin, there'll be two dead men on this ranch for every High T man you've killed."

Rod, meeting the blaze of those eyes, knew that speech or explanation would be useless. All hope of a truce between the two ranches was gone—and now each outfit would try to destroy the other.

"I'll have your foreman taken into the house."

"No, you won't. I'm taking him home." And Porter dropped to his knees again, so that he could place Lark's body across his shoulders. Then he heaved to his feet and lifted the dead cowman crosswise onto his horse.

"I'm taking my dead home with me, Martin. Tomorrow you'll have to arrange for more than one funeral on this spread—because I'm making that promise, right here where Lark was killed."

Pulling out the reins of the foreman's pony so as to lead him, he got into his own saddle and moved out to the trail at a walk.

The waddies were saddled now, some of them already racing over the home range to find Tom Lark's killer. But when the last man had quirted out of the yard, Rod still waited. And then he heard the slow clop of Serena's pony. It came into the yard and stopped.

He looked up at last and found a stranger. This was not the Serena of moonlight and laughter—or even the unhappy Serena who had been so soft in his arms. This was a slim, rigid-backed girl whose face had sharpened until it held no touch of warmth. Her eyes were as flamingly dark as those of Cal Porter.

"Serena——"

"I caused Lark's death," she said flatly. "I thought you'd keep your word. I didn't believe you were just a killer Bill Vance had hired. I even believed you meant—this morning—when you kissed me."

He tried to take her hand, to force her to listen to him; but she backed her pony and told him: "I heard what my father said. His men will do to the Crossed Bones exactly what it's been doing to us."

"Serena." Rod's voice was rough with desperation. "We can't let this happen to us. You and I——"

Her laughter cut across his words—short, harsh sound of mockery. "There's no 'we' that includes anyone who can shoot down an unarmed man."

And wheeling her mount, she rode out of the yard without a single backward glance of farewell.

WITH A GUN strapped at each thigh, Martin saddled a pony and left the deserted Crossed Bones, pounding along the trail to the north without any particular plan of action, beyond finding the waddies and organizing them into an orderly

search. First, they'd find the skulkink little man who had killed Tom Lark; and then he would keep the whole outfit on the move until they located the outlaws who had murdered the three High T riders.

The thought of Serena, with her eyes blazing from a white contemptuous face, was like a lash against him; and he drove his pony hard until he sighted Paint Hill just ahead.

Rod remembered that the rustlers had driven the stock toward the north of the mesa instead of the lower land where they could be hazed toward the State line. He had wondered about that even when a dozen guns had been pumping at him as he'd tried to drag the two wounded night riders into the cover of the brush. At last the raiders, finding their fire unanswered, had gone on without bothering to look for the men at whom they had been shooting. But they had gone north. And the north side of the mesa pushed its edge flush against a broad mountainside!

Abruptly, Rod dug in his heels and rode up the slope, cantering across the tableland until he reached its northern lip. But directly ahead was the solid mountain wall.

Turning back he sent his pony down the steep western slope—and then all the nerves of his body went tight. With one movement he threw himself out of the saddle, struck the ground and rolled over into the protection of the brush. But no bullet whistled through the air and he waited for long, slow minutes without hearing even the faintest noise. Pulling himself up, he glanced over the expanse of brush above. Then, once more, he heard the unmistakable sound of a pony's clopping hoofs.

The mesquite shook gently and hands appeared, pushing it apart. Rod jerked one of his Colts from the holster, lifted it, with his thumb feeling for the hammer—and the weapon almost slipped from his grasp. For the man above was Bill Vance, owner of the Crossed Bones!

The thin, unshaven countenance seemed taut with fear, and Vance was stepping through the brush with utmost caution.

Lowering his gun, Rod moved carefully forward. But his heel crunched against a dry root and the man above sprang back through the mesquite. Martin leaped for his waiting pony and rode around the base to head him off.

The little horse lunged forward, but Rod was forced to slow the pace for here the brush was thick and tangled, almost impassable. Suddenly, he stopped, thinking that he heard the rustling of weeds—and as he turned in the saddle, a gun roared. He tried to swing up both Colts—only to find that his hands were suddenly limp, refusing to obey his will. Shadows swept across the bright sunlight, turning the world to murky darkness. His pony, terrified, jumped forward in headlong flight, and Rod, fighting against the darkness closing in on him, was aware of clinging to the horse's back while mesquite tore across his face. Then the terrified animal tripped and fell, sending him flying from the saddle as the threatening darkness dropped like a smothering blanket.

BLINDING PAIN shot through his head as Rod moved. Forcing open his eyes, he stared at the faint blue mist of earliest twilight. Near his hand lay his Colt. Then he remembered and sat up, in spite of the drums of pain.

After a moment the throbbing

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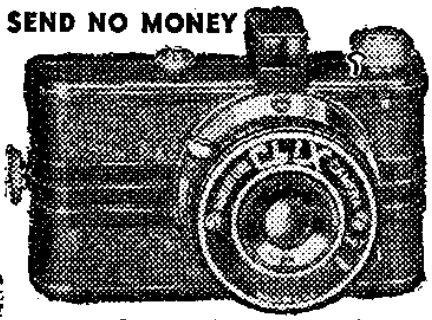

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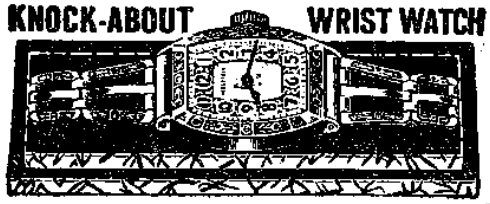

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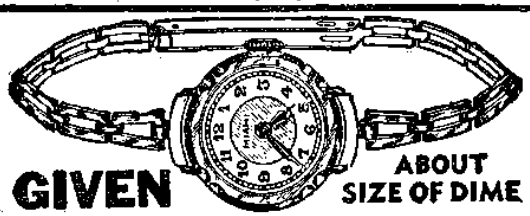

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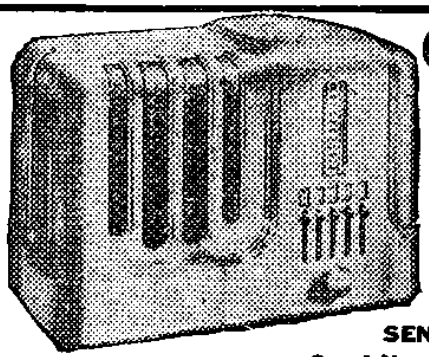

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slowed and he could see. There was a warm dampness on his forehead and he discovered that it was blood.

He was in a growth of thick mesquite and scrub pine. Above him was the wall of the mesa, which meant that his pony had kept traveling around its base until he fell.

He struggled to his feet; then had to wait for a wave of dizzy weakness to pass. His pony was probably lying injured some place in the weeds, for he had fallen heavily just as Rod lost consciousness.

Gazing around, he saw a crushed mesquite brush which showed that the animal had plunged straight ahead. He walked slowly toward it and beyond, where more trampled undergrowth made an easily followed trail. And then, Martin's foot found only space—instead of solid earth.

Instinctively, he jerked backward, throwing himself onto the ground and clutching at the tough-rooted mesquite. His feet gained purchase at last and he pulled himself from the crevasse which the overhanging weeds had hidden. Gasping and spent, he rested until the pain in his head lessened; then, on his hands and knees, Rod crawled back to the edge and peered down into the dimly lighted crevasse. It was tremendously deep.

He twisted to look upward and discovered the crevasse was directly below the northern end of Paint Hill Mesa. On the mesa the land appeared to touch the adjoining mountain; but from below, the sky could be seen between the hills—through the screen of overgrowing brush. And Rod's eyes narrowed, for not only did the brush grow over the mesa edge, but additional weeds had been fastened onto it—to conceal the space between the two hills!

The muscles in Martin's jaws tightened so that his mouth clamped shut and his gaze, as he turned back to the crevasse, held the cold glint

of a gun barrel. He stared into the dim depths—and the lines cut deeper into his face. From below there was a faint sound. When he located the slight movement, he lifted his gun, leveled it carefully, and pulled down. There was no further sound or movement, then, and the little pony that had carried him out of danger, was freed from pain.

But the crevasse held a horrible picture before Rod's straining eyes. It was the burial ground of hundreds and hundreds of cattle.

"They were driven from the mesa—stampeded over the edge to their death!" he told himself. "That's the answer to the mystery of the rustled High T stock—to what became of the cattle driven off Paint Hill range. The thieves weren't rustlers."

And then he jumped up, remembering that Bill Vance had peered through the brush—although Vance was supposed to be in Chula Vista. He had told Rod he would not return to Skeleton Valley for a year. But he was here, hiding on his own ranch, ready to kill in order to avoid discovery!

As Rod turned into the thicker brush, his foot struck something that thudded heavily back to earth. A rust-streaked gun glinted dully on the ground. He picked it up and turned it in his hands. It was fully loaded and must have lain there for months. And then, rubbing a finger against the metal, he saw letters emerge from the stain. Jerking off his neckerchief, he scoured at the spot until he finally could read the "L. P."

Lute Porter! Serena's brother—known as an outlaw trying to destroy his own father. But an outlaw living by the proceeds of his crime didn't drive stolen cattle over the edge of a cliff.

Rod's eyes lifted to the top of the mesa again, and then he knew what had happened. The gun had been thrown into the crevasse from the mesa, but had caught in the brush.

Dropping to his hands and knees, he searched the damp earth until his groping fingers discovered a crumpled, sodden, black Stetson. He straightened it out carefully and turned the leather band to the light. The hat also bore the initials L. P.

He wrapped the hat in his neckerchief, thrust the rusty gun into a pocket, and started to plough through the tangled brush. As soon as he could find a pony, he would go to Rawhide and ask the sheriff for a posse—to hunt down Bill Vance.

Dusk was turning into night when Rod, dizzy with recurring pain from his wound, his face wet from the struggle through the brush, emerged onto the grassland near the western slope of the mesa. And then a gun muzzle dug into his back.

"Just keep walking, Martin! I'll tell you where to go."

It was Dan Cannon!

"RIGHT into the brush, hombre."

Cannon's gun jammed harder and Rod, trying to see through the thick early darkness, thrust out his hands to separate the mesquite. Beyond the brush was a small, gloom-filled pocket of land wedged between the hills.

"Keep walking," Cannon ordered. "You'll see a pal of yours in just a minute."

Only when he was less than two yards away could Rod discern the shack huddled against a hillside. Then Cannon called and the door swung open, although there had been not the faintest glow of light visible from the outside.

Under the jab of the gun, Rod stepped into a sparsely furnished room where the single window was covered with blankets.

Cannon entered behind him; the door swung to—and facing him was Bill Vance, the owner of the Crossed Bones.

Vance's eyes looked crazed against his stubble-covered face. "Yes, it's me, Martin, and this wouldn't have happened if you'd done your job and minded your own business."

"My business was running the Crossed Bones, or I thought it was. I didn't know I'd signed on with a crook and a killer, though——"

Cannon laughed and nudged him with the Colt. "Keep your mouth shut and we'll do the talking. Just sit in this chair while I fix you up."

He backed him toward a straight, crudely built chair. As Rod sat down, he motioned to Bill Vance to search him. The rancher ran his hands through his pockets—bringing out the weather-beaten Stetson, and the rust-stained gun.

His face turned a sickish white and his eyes rolled toward Cannon. "Where'd those come from? You told me you'd made a clean job of it. Now——"

"I don't know." Dan Cannon's face was like rock crossed with distorting lines. "And don't start jumping on me like I was one of your cowpokes. He probably found them in the brush below the mesa. Too bad you had to hire a nosy hombre."

"Listen, Cannon"—Vance's face was a pale green splotch—"you've made me take enough chances, but nobody's going to put a rope around my neck."

And whirling, he leveled the gun at Rod Martin's heart. "There's only one way to take care of a double-crossing wise hombre like you," he said. "I'm going to make sure you don't do any talking."

But Dan Cannon's weapon flashed its point toward Vance. "If this hombre disappears too suddenly, it'll cause plenty of commotion. There won't be any doubt that somebody got rid of him—and a posse sometimes has a streak of luck. If they trail him to his hideout, you'd be finished, Vance."

The rancher's arm lowered and his face went loose. "Yeah—what'd you bring him here for? We can't keep him and we can't afford to let him go."

Cannon laughed. "Wait'll I get him fixed so he'll stay nice and quiet. There's some rawhide cord hanging on a nail over there. Give it to me."

WHILE Vance covered Rod with a gun, Cannon bound him securely to the chair.

"That'll hold him." Stepping back, Cannon prepared to roll a cigarette. "Now we have to see that he won't remember anything about tonight."

"That's all," Vance's voice lifted shrilly. "You've got me into the place you want me, and now I'll——"

A gun appeared in his hand—and it was leveled on Dan Cannon.

Cannon stood there nonchalantly.

"Sure, shoot me and kill Martin, too," he drawled. "They'll hang you within twenty-four hours—because you're so scared you won't get out of the country before they find you."

Slowly Vance lowered the gun. "What'll we do?" he asked, his voice almost quavering.

Cannon laughed. "We'll keep Martin from talking—from doing anything. He'll take orders and keep his mouth shut."

His eyes swung toward Rod.

"You'll do it all right," he said. "I'm going to send word to Serena Porter that you're in trouble and need her."

Rod returned the grin. "Go ahead. She won't come. That'll be just the thing to keep her away. If you'd invite her to my hanging, it might work."

"It'll work. I've seen you together. I've seen her look at you ——" The amusement left his face and his eyes turned into hard, bright blue lines of hate. "I'll get her here and I'll keep her here as long as we want you to keep still. Then"—the eyes flared—"if she behaves herself, I may marry her."

Rod lunged desperately, straining against the rawhide cords, and Cannon laughed again.

"Take it easy. She'll be glad to marry me when the time comes—and don't figure her father'll be able to do anything about it. The Porters have caused so much trouble, nobody'd be surprised at Serena disappearing. Besides, I'll see that people hear a story about a quarrel which made her leave home to join her outlaw brother."

Rod forced himself to remember, with sharp relief, the black, contemptuous fury in Serena's eyes, the chill pallor of her face as she had turned away from him. She'd never come for him!

"Where's Eubanks?" Cannon demanded of Vance.

"Outside."

"Call him."

Vance went to the door and whistled. Another whistle answered and a small, wiry man stepped into the room. It was the man who had killed Tom Lark!

Cannon snapped at him: "You're to ride for the High T right now and see Serena Porter. Be sure you see her alone; don't talk otherwise. Say that Rod Martin's here, wounded. But that he's found out

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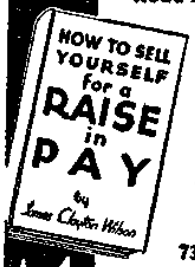

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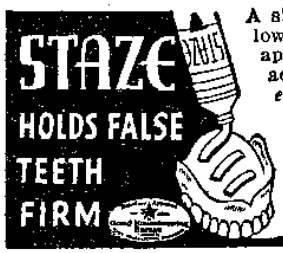

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what happened to the cattle rustled from the High T and also knows where her brother is. Don't forget that part—it's the most important."

The man nodded and Cannon looked down at Rod. "It's my hunch that she'll be here before morning."

WHEN Serena reached the High T, a waddie was waiting at the gates.

"Your father wants to see you, ma'am." And reaching up, he caught the cheek strap, halting her mount.

"But——"

"I was told to see that you went right to the house."

Leading her pony he walked into the yard at her side; then marched up the steps behind her. "Here she is, boss," he said.

Cal Porter confronted his daughter coldly: "I guess you know Tom Lark is dead?"

She nodded and his eyes turned fierce. "I suspected that! Maybe you even knew it'd happen."

"Dad!"

"Keep still! I'm not even going to ask where you've been. I don't need to. But from now on I'll fight the same as—as the people fighting me. I don't figure I've got a son, because I'd rather think he died last year instead of turning outlaw. From now on I'm not hunting Lute Porter. I'm out to find a killer who is working for Bill Vance. I've sent for the sheriff to handle Tom Lark's killing officially—but I'll handle it faster my own way. Within a week there won't be a man left on the Crossed Bones—if they're not dead, they'll run. Now you can make your choice between me or an outlaw paid by Bill Vance. If you feel that Lute Porter's your brother, then I'm not your father—and this ranch isn't your home."

"Dad." The word came huskily from Serena's throat because she was trying to keep back a sob. "You're

Continued on page 124

Snowbound Stranger

by James B. McLean

Mary had never thought love would come to her and leave so quickly——

THE FIRST cold winds of winter cut through the heavy sheepskin parka and wool trousers Mary Case was wearing as she spurred her horse through the smother of snow falling from the skies.

Mary shivered, slapped her hands together to keep the blood flowing. Anxiously, she peered through the blinding white curtain of flakes, hoping to sight the XC ranch house.

After a few moments she discerned the dim shapes of the ranch build-

ings. Sighing faintly, she reined her mount toward one of the huge barns —but the horse shied away and bucked back on its haunches.

Gripping its sides with her knees, Mary fought him back to earth. She strained her eyes to see what it was that had attracted the horse's attention. After a swift glance to both sides, she caught a faint movement of a white-covered mound directly in front.

In one smooth movement she dismounted and ran to where the shape lay unmoving now.

As Mary knelt, she brushed the snow away, and a startled "Oh!" escaped from her lips. The bleak features of a man peered unconsciously up at her, and his mouth moved weakly—but the words he was trying to utter were indistinguishable.

One glance told Mary that the stranger was suffering from frostbite and over-exposure, probably nearer death than she even feared. Without hesitation, she ran to the bunkhouse where a pale, yellow light beat against the whiteness of the night. Her little fists pounded against the door.

"Buck! Buck!" she screamed. "Come out here. I need you and some of the boys."

The door was flung open, revealing the big body of Buck Sorrel, XC foreman, and the faces of XC punchers behind him.

"What's the trouble, Mary?" Buck's deep, resonant voice sounded reassuringly for the first time since Mary gave him the job of foreman a few months before.

"There's a man over there in the snow," Mary said breathlessly. "I need your help to get him into the house."

Buck grunted, turned and ordered the men to come along with him. They donned heavy coats and Mary led them to where the man's huddled body was partly covered with drifted snow.

"You sure you want him taken into the house?" Buck asked doubtfully, peering down at the man. "You can't tell who he might be."

"I can take better care of him there," Mary said, looking down at the man.

"He'll need quite a bit of care if I'm not mistaken," she continued thoughtfully as the little group trudged toward the house.

"He might be an escaped convict, too," Buck warned, walking beside her, and Mary didn't escape the hint of danger involved.

She glanced sharply at him, then ran ahead of the men in order to open the door. Ching, the cook and general handyman, was standing in the center of the living room, his eyes wide and wondering at all this commotion.

"Ching," Mary ordered, taking charge of the situation, "bring some snow water into the guest room." She motioned for the men to follow her into the bedroom.

WHEN the stranger had been laid on the bed, and she, Buck and Ching were the only ones left, Mary applied the freezing mixture to the man's chest, head and arms.

As she worked, she spoke to Buck, "Have one of the men go for Doc Fritz. He's over at Emily Duncan's. I don't know whether I can pull him out of this or not."

Buck started to protest, but Mary pounded her open hand with a little fist. "Buck Sorrel," she flared, "I've stood about enough of your stubbornness. If——"

Buck's face was surly as he turned, stomped out of the room. Then Mary turned to look at the man who

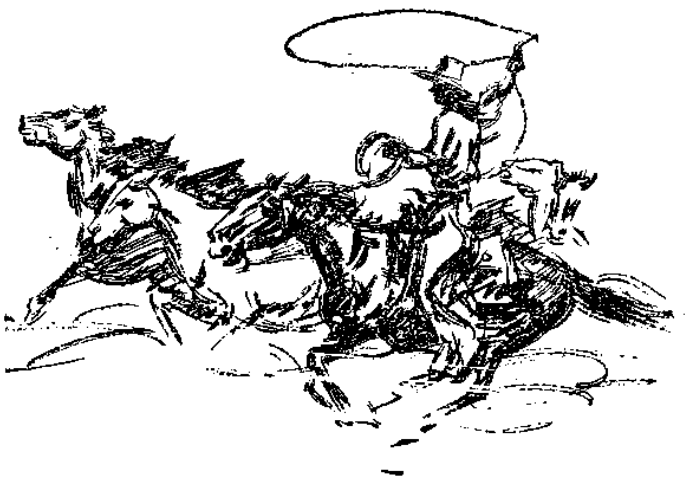
lay so still on the bed.

She studied his youngish face, the long sweep of the jaw, and straight aquiline nose. Just as she tentatively decided she liked this pilgrim, his eyes blinked feebly, opened.

"How do you feel?" Mary asked gently.

"Cold as a snow rabbit," he whispered and grinned faintly.

Mary smiled back at him, all barriers of strangeness swept away by his infectious smile. The stranger turned his head around, eyes sweeping the room; then returned to rest on Mary.



"How come I'm here and —where am I?" he asked in that hoarse whisper.

"I found you lying out in the ranchyard, nearly frozen to death," Mary explained. "I had my men bring you in here. One of them went for Doc Fritz. He'll be here soon."

The stranger laughed. "I don't think I'll need a sawbones. I feel better already." He tried to sit up, but fell back against the pillows.

Mary looked at him anxiously. "You aren't as strong as you think," she told him. She went to the window in hopes of seeing the doctor. When she turned to the man on the bed again, she said: "The doctor should be here any time now. He was over at Emily Duncan's when I was there. I was returning from there when——"

She stopped, gazed at the stranger in amazement. He had jerked upright in bed, eyes blazing with a wild, feverish light. For a moment Mary was afraid he was delirious. But his next words belied her thoughts.

"Where did you say you were?" he asked in a cold, rational voice.

"Why"—Mary was hesitant—"over at Emily Duncan's. I've been allowing her to homestead a piece of my land a couple of miles from here. She's been feeling badly——"

Again she broke off because this odd-acting fellow was attempting to climb out of bed. Rushing over, she pushed him back.

"I — don't know why," she said, between pushes and shoves, "you should become so upset all of a sudden; but I'm not allowing you out of this bed until the doctor says so." With all her supple, range-bred strength, she managed to hold him down.

She was still holding his arms down, despite his feeble protestations, when the doctor and Buck came into the room a few minutes later.

Mary arose, then; allowed the doctor to stand by the bed. "He wants to get out of bed, doctor, but I refused to allow it."

After a quick examination of the patient, the doctor nodded his head approvingly. "It's a good thing you did, Mary," he told her. "He should stay here at least three days yet."

The young man's chin was set in a straight, uncompromising line, eyes hidden by slitted lids.

"It's going to take a team of dray

horses to keep me here," he told them between closed teeth. "I came to these parts to see Emily Duncan, and nothing's going to stop me from it."

"I'll have Buck and a couple of the boys stay here and watch over you," Mary threatened. She turned to where she thought Buck was standing, but to her amazement, he wasn't there.

WALKING over to the door, she called, "Buck! Where are you?" But there was no reply and, puzzled, Mary retraced her steps to where the doctor was standing, packing his kit.

"Keep him in bed by all means," the doctor advised and handed her some medicine with instructions for its use.

When the old doctor had departed, Mary told Ching, who had been standing by all this time, to prepare some coffee. When the aged but sprightly Oriental had padded away to the kitchen, Mary turned to this unpredictable and irritable young man on the bed.

"You know," she said quizzically, "you're a funny one. I don't know why I should make you stay in bed when you don't want to. But it's the doctor's orders, and when you're better, you can go on over to Emily's. What's your name?"

"What's yours?" he asked grouchily.

Mary laughed. "I let myself wide open for that one," she conceded. "My name is Mary Case and this is my ranch you're on. It's called the XC."

His face twisted into a begrudging grin. "My name's Glen Shaw," he said shortly.

"Now that introductions are made," Mary said, "would you like to have some coffee?" She directed Ching, who had just entered, to set the tray he was carrying, on a table by the bed.

After they had taken their first sips of the steaming liquid, it was Glen Shaw who broke the silence.

"I wonder, ma'am," he spoke in a meek, mild manner, "if there'd be a place here on the XC for me?"

Mary looked at him in surprise, taken back by the sudden change in manner. His face had relaxed from its tense lines, and was actually pleasant. Mary studied it more thoroughly than she had done before, and recalled the warning Buck had made. But she dismissed it impatiently. Glen Shaw looked like a type of person who was clean-cut all the way.

"I thought you wanted to go over to Emily Duncan's," she said half questioningly. "And anyway, I should consult my foreman, Buck Sorrel; but he's disappeared—so I guess I'll hire you myself."

"That's mighty fine of you, ma'am," Glen Shaw thanked her. "I do appreciate it."

"Don't mention it," Mary told him. "When you're able to be up and about, I'll see what kind of a puncher you'll make—and if you don't make good, I won't keep you," she finished.

He just grinned.

As Mary lay in bed that night, she tried to figure out the unusual actions of Glen Shaw, of his reactions when she had mentioned Emily Duncan's name.

She also had learned from one of the men that Buck Sorrel had left the ranch, headed toward town in a great hurry. This wasn't unusual because Buck disappeared right when she always wanted or needed him the most. But no one in his right mind would attempt to reach town in this snow storm—unless it was for something very urgent.

Mary, herself, had had a hard time finding the ranch earlier in the evening when she had returned from Emily's.

And Emily Duncan was another strange one—although Mary had never given it much thought. The girl had simply come to her and asked to build a little house on XC land. But now all the events of the night seemed to tie up together.

Mary was still trying to puzzle out the picture when she dropped off to sleep.

WHEN MARY awoke in the morning, the storm had subsided and the rangeland was blanketed with a soft cushion of white. She lay there for a while, enjoying the peace and quiet, the beauty which lay outside her window. Then suddenly she remembered last night.

Jumping out of bed, she hastily donned her clothes. The tantalizing odor of wheatcakes, bacon and coffee assailed her nostrils as she dashed downstairs—and stopped. Glen Shaw, his face cut and one eye rapidly swelling, was sitting on the fur-covered sofa in front of the fireplace where a fire was blazing.

"Good morning, Miss Mary," he spoke brightly. "You know that little pep talk about firing me if I didn't suit you, sort of made me scared; so I thought I'd better get to work right away."

Before Mary could recover from her astonishment, he arose and gallantly extended his arm. "May I escort you into the kitchen where Ching has prepared a bountiful and luscious breakfast?"

"Well!" Mary gasped. "You've certainly made yourself at home. And you mustn't have been as sick as we thought you were." She gazed wonderingly at his eye and face.

"You can't keep a good cowman down—very long," he said in mock seriousness. "And I'm taking advantage of your hospitality because I've

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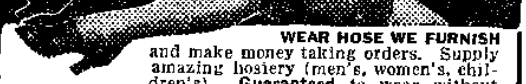

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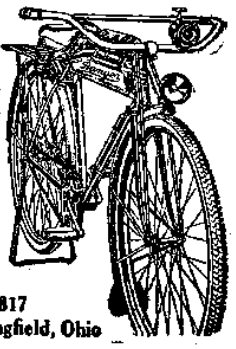

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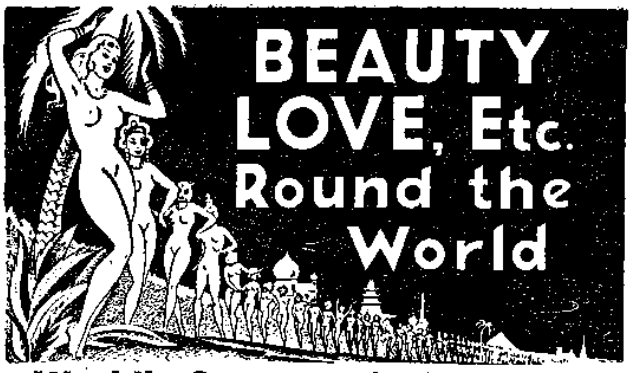

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just been elected foreman of the XC by the hands—if you say so—because Buck Sorrel seems to have skipped the country. So I have a lot of business to talk over with you——"

"But how——" Mary began, pointing at his face.

"Oh—this?" He touched his swollen eye. "Several of the boys didn't like the idea of my stepping in here and taking over so suddenlike—but I managed to convince them that it was for their best interests." He grinned.

"And now," Mary said sarcastically, her anger rising at his presumptuousness, "I suppose you're going to try and convince me?"

"Oh, no," he said hastily—and again that infectious grin flickered across his youthful face. "Nothing so obvious as that. I was hoping that with a little breakfast you could be persuaded——"

"You're the one who's going to be persuaded," Buck Sorrel's voice came from the doorway.

Mary and Glen whirled to face the Colt .45 that Buck held in his big fist. The man's face was harsh, brutal.

"You're going to be persuaded to go in and see the sheriff in town," Sorrel continued savagely. "I couldn't find him so I came back here. Some of the boys in the bunkhouse just told me you were going by the name of Glen Shaw and that you were taking over my job." Sorrel laughed harshly. "That's a——"

Glen looked as if he had been kicked in the face and Mary, her heart pounding, saw him advance. She stifled a scream as Sorrel's trigger finger tensed. She caught her breath as Glen shot forward, smashed a solid blow against Sorrel's chin.

Buck sprawled on the floor, scrambled up to one knee to stare at Glen towering over him. Sorrel's gun had hit against the wall, and now he made a wild lunge toward it in an effort to get a hold on its butt.

But Mary was faster. She took one long stride and kicked it through the kitchen door. Sorrel arose to his feet, glared at Glen who stared back, face grim, masklike.

"You can't get away with this!" Buck rasped, his hand on the door knob. "You won't give me a chance now to tell Mary about you, but she'll find out soon enough."

"It's about time she found out some things about you, too, my fine buckaroo," Glen shot back. "Now get out and don't let me see you around here again, *Tuck Trua!*"

The man whom Mary had known as Buck Sorrel, stiffened, whitened, and slunk out of the house.

OVER the breakfast table, Glen explained that he had recognized Buck from sheriffs' posters as being an ex-convict, and that his real name was Tuck Trua.

"But what are you doing up here?" Mary asked, her mind filled with doubts as to Glen and all that he was telling her. Sorrel, too, had his side of the story which she hadn't heard yet.

"That's something I won't be able to tell you right now," he said. His voice was low and his head averted, so she couldn't see his eyes. "All that I can say is that I came up here to see someone who sent me a message."

"And you expect me to hire you as my foreman with only that little knowledge about you?" Mary looked questioningly at him. She wanted to believe what he was saying—and some inner instinct told her to take his words at their face value. There was something about him—a boyishness and a manner she liked. For the first time since she had brought him in, unconscious and half-frozen from the cold, she asked herself why she had made so much fuss about him—and wondered at the lightninglike consequences that had followed her actions.

The feeling she had in her heart was tantalizing, depthless, and her mind couldn't probe into the hidden recesses of this strange emotion she felt so strongly.

"That's up to you," Glen was telling her briefly, tonelessly. "I guess I've made a silly fool of myself, acting this way; but I thought if I could work for you here that I might be able to find out some things I wanted to know." He looked up, his face serious, strained. "And now that I've gone all the way in making a fool of myself, I'll go the rest of the way. I've found a few things that I didn't expect to find. I——"

He stopped, his eyes searching Mary's face for some hint to go on; to tell her what he had on the tip of his tongue; but, abruptly, he jumped up, vanished through the door leading to the living room. Mary sat there, her heart thumping, feeling as though she had been holding her breath for hours. She breathed in short, stifling gasps, gripping the edge of the table with her tiny, white-knuckled fingers.

Subconsciously, she knew what Glen Shaw had been prepared to say —and her immediate reaction was to run after him, to call him back.

And then she thought of Emily Duncan! It was very strange how her name had made Glen—— She blushed slightly when she found herself thinking of him by his first name —and forgot, for the moment, the connection she had started to make between him and the homesteading girl.

Slowly Mary rose, went into the ranch office in another part of the house. She sat down in the old swivel chair before the spur-scarred, oak desk, cupped her hands around

her chin, and thought of how her life had changed. Ever since she was a tow-headed girl in pigtails, she had been so busy with ranch affairs that she had never thought about love. But now—now it was serious. It had been thrust upon her—and wonder of wonders, she didn't want to rebel against it! And for Mary, rebellious to any outside influence before, this was unusual.

A HALF an hour later, Glen walked into the office. His face was gray and drawn. He didn't sit down but stood in front of Mary.

She sensed a sudden hostility in his manner.

"Mary," he used her name almost reverently, "I'm going to leave the ranch. I'm resigning. I think it would be better for both of us. But," his face hardened, "I won't be very far away if you ever need me. I—I'm going over to Emily Duncan's. I've just learned she needs me——"

His voice stopped as Mary got to her feet, her eyes blazing. Her words were stilted by anger.

"You're—going to—stay with Emily?" she said slowly, unbelievably.

He didn't look at her as he nodded his head.

"Yes," he said whisperingly. "I've just learned that the man who killed my father was Tuck Trua. I didn't know it before. Emily Duncan told me. She's the only one who knew the identity of the real murderer. I didn't know or I'd have killed Trua last night."

He paused, looking for some hint of forgiveness from Mary, but her face was expressionless—numbed by what he was saying. Then he continued:

"Trua knew that I was the one accused of killing my father, and that was why he wanted to take me in to see the sheriff. What he didn't know was that some evidence had turned up and I had been acquitted. Trua believed it was the perfect crime; but Emily trailed him, found him, without letting me know until just a while ago.

"Trua will be back to get me, perhaps try to intimidate you. That's one of the reasons I'm staying close to the XC, to try and protect you from his rough-house tactics. The reason I'm leaving here is because—because of something else."

"But why?" Mary asked, her face revealing that she only partly understood what he was trying to say. "Why must you stay at Emily Duncan's? You—you're welcome to stay here as long as you like."

There, she told herself, was the forgiveness he wanted. Even though her heart was aching with the knowledge of what he had told her about Emily, the words she had just spoken should make him tell her what had been in his heart last night. He couldn't be in love with Emily—it just didn't seem possible!

Glen was advancing toward her now, and before she could resist, fight him away as she wanted to do, his arms held her against his chest and he was murmuring:

"Mary, you've trusted me this far, tried to believe in me. I wish you'd keep that trust alive for a few more days until things are clearer." His lips brushed her hair.

Mary felt cold, stiff, unable to think straight. Glen was asking her to do something that her reason told her not to do. Pushing slightly away from him, she searched his eyes.

"That's something I can't do, Glen," she told him in a whisper. "That's asking too much."

His face was a mask of bitterness as he returned her gaze. "I guess I

couldn't expect a different answer," he said slowly, "but—my love for you will never change. I—I was trying to tell you last night that I loved you."

Mary nodded. "I knew," she said. "I——" His lips pressed against hers, stopped the words.

She fought to loosen his encircling arms, but he only held her tighter. Then he released her, stepped backward. Mary's breast rose and fell as she angrily wiped the kiss away from her lips.

"You're—a—fool," she said between sharp breaths. "You couldn't act like a sane man if you had to. You——"

Her words were useless. Glen had whirled, vanished through the open door, allowing gusts of cold wind to blow into the warm office. The air struck through Mary's thoughts and anger, made her think more sensibly.

A soft sob shook her body, but the tears didn't come. She turned, sank into the chair before the desk. She had never thought it possible that love would come to her and leave so quickly. Unhappy, she sat staring out the window.

SHE was still staring out the window when the sheriff and Tuck Trua rode up, dismounted and entered the office.

Mary swiveled around to face the two men. Her first impulse was to tell the sheriff what Glen had told her; to tell it even though there was a doubt in her mind about the veracity of the story. But on second thought she changed her mind, decided to await developments.

The men's faces were heavy, ominous.

"How are you, Mary?" The sheriff's thick voice was respectful. He had known her since she was a baby.

"I'm fine," Mary answered, but she was tense, high-strung. "What is it you want, sheriff?"

"Buck"—the lawman jerked his thumb toward the other man—"says

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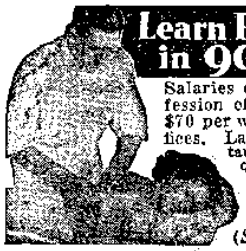

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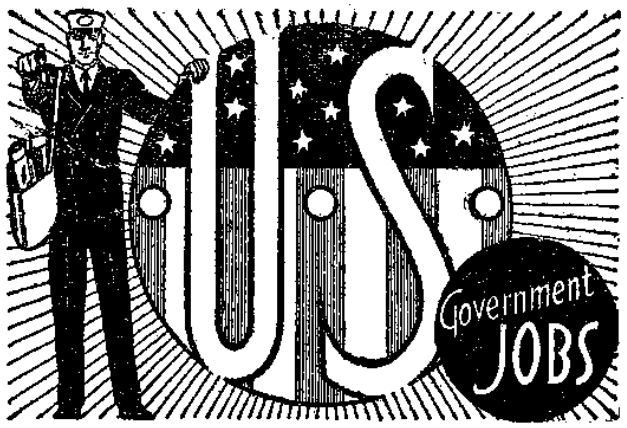

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AMORC TEMPLE

San Jose **California**

there's a fellow here who's wanted for a murder over in Neuva Mex. I came out to check up on the story."

Mary regarded the sheriff for a brief moment; then shot a swift, penetrating glance at Tuck Trua who reddened under Mary's scrutiny. Her lips curled scornfully.

"This is the man you want right here, sheriff," she said softly. "He's the real murderer, and his name isn't Buck Sorrel. It's Tuck Trua."

Trua's face blanched when Mary shot home this accusation. A look of bewilderment and amazement spread over the big sheriff's face.

"You were so sure that you'd covered up your tracks so well, Trua," Mary spoke to her old foreman, "that you were confident you could still keep that murder charge alive against Glen Shaw, weren't you?"

"It's a lie!" Trua snarled, turning to the sheriff. "This fellow, who's going by the name of Shaw, has filled her head with a lot of lies. He's the fellow who killed his father. He was on trial for the murder and he must have escaped from prison."

Mary, gaining confidence that Glen had spoken the truth, said to the sheriff, "I'll get Glen Shaw and prove to you that this man, who has used the name of Buck Sorrel, is the real murderer. If he'll——"

She didn't finish, because for the first time, Trua's nerve broke. He turned and fled out the door before the sheriff or Mary could make any movement to stop him. Mary was ahead of the lawman as both of them ran to the door—stopped.

The scene that met Mary's eyes made her gasp. Trua was standing on the steps, motionless, his hands hovering above the thonged-down holsters hanging at his sides. Just dismounting out there in the snow-covered ranchyard, were Glen Shaw and Emily Duncan. Glen caught sight of Trua standing on the steps and before Emily could reach the ground, he hit her horse on the rump, sent it out of the range of flying lead

that was about to break over the stillness of that winter scene.

Trua advanced slowly down the steps.

"Stop where you are!" The sheriff's words cracked through the silence like the report of a bullwhip. "The law'll handle this—and there won't be any gun throwing while I'm here."

He started down the steps, a black Colt filling his fist.

But Tuck Trua was desperate. He flung himself to one side, triggering his guns as he did so. A gun blast from out there in the yard mingled with the other detonations and made Mary's eardrums quiver. She saw Trua's body hang suspended in mid-air for a second; then send a shower of snow puffing up as it hit the ground.

MARY'S throat ached from the scream as she stood there breathlessly now, praying for she didn't know what. Her eyes were on Glen as he stood swaying slightly. The sheriff was kneeling by Trua's body and Mary advanced toward Glen.

But she stopped when Emily ran up to Glen, put her arms around his neck. Mary heard her ask him, "Glen, are you all right?" Mary saw him nod, holster his gun, his eyes never leaving Mary's face.

Even when the sheriff walked over and announced heavily, "He's dead. I'm holding you on a charge of homicide," Glen's eyes didn't leave Mary.

She turned, almost ran into the office. It was finished, she kept repeating over and over to herself, forgetting all the things she had done to prove Glen's innocence. Why she had done them, she didn't know—not until Glen came into the room with Emily.

"Mary," his voice came to her as she kept her back turned to them, "I'd like you to meet my sister."

Mary turned around slowly, unable to believe what she had heard. Emily, smiling at Mary, came forward to put her arm over Mary's shoulders.

"It's true, Mary," Emily said. "Glen's my brother and our real name is Dunbar. I knew about Trua and *when I learned he was your foreman,* I sent a message to Glen, telling him that I believed I had found our father's murderer. I had learned he was up in this part of the country, and homesteaded my little place until I could find where he was exactly. I had better luck than I'd anticipated. And now I'll leave so Glen can do some explaining." She turned, went into the living room.

"But what about the sheriff, here?" Mary asked. "How did you prove to him that you were within the law——"

Her eyes lowered to the deputy sheriff's badge Glen held in his hand. When she looked up, her eyes were bright, shining with a light that reflected her happiness.

"I didn't play my hand very well," Glen was saying. "I didn't want to tell you about Emily being my sister because I—I didn't want you to get mixed up in it any more than you were. At first I wanted to work here on the XC because I thought it would look suspicious if I stayed with Emily. Then I found I loved you——"

"I haven't played my hand very well, either," Mary said softly as his arms held her close. "But no matter what I've done, I've really loved you through everything."

His lips, pressing hers, made further words unnecessary; and she eagerly responded to his kiss—with no thought of drawing away from him again!

LASSOED LOVE

Continued from page 112

all wrong. I haven't been seeing Lute—and he's not an outlaw."

"Keep still. You heard what I said."

After that he remained in the house, watching her. She heard him giving directions for Lark's funeral, ordering ammunition, sending a rider to town for extra men. When she went out to the yard, he strolled after her. Later, going to her room, she discovered a waddie stationed below her window—like a guard!

Sudden tears rushed into her eyes and spilled burningly down her cheeks. She wiped them away and stared at her own reflection in the mirror, wondering if this would be herself—this girl with eyes that held dark pain.

She had to stop the hurting thought of Rod Martin which was like a knife, thrust constantly into her heart. She would not remember his face as he had looked at her after Tom Lark had been killed.

"Maybe," she whispered aloud, "I was wrong. He couldn't have arranged to have Lark shot like that. Besides, why would he want to kill the foreman?"

His kiss had told her about himself; had made her know all that he was. Or at least she had thought it had.

She whirled out of the room, trying to escape the thought of him.

AFTER SUPPER, Serena read—or pretended to, sitting under a lamp in the living room, holding a book in her hands. Her father was in a chair beside another lamp, but he did not speak or look at her until she got to her feet.

"I'm going to bed, Dad. Good night."

"I'll take a lamp upstairs for you," he said.

"You needn't——"

"I'm taking it," he broke in, "and I'm locking the door on you."

She looked at him and then turned away. He was no longer her father but a jailer.

"Just a minute!" a voice suddenly shouted from the yard. "Where you trying to go, hombre?"

"I have to see Serena Porter," someone spoke from the ranch house steps.

"What about?"

"I'll tell her."

Cal Porter strode into the hall. "Bring him in, Hank."

The waddie pushed a slight, wiry man up the steps and Porter demanded: "Now what do you want?"

"I've got to give Miss Porter a message."

"A message?" The man's dark eyes narrowed, glinting at the stranger's face before his glance swept to the girl. Then he said abruptly: "All right—there she is."

And he hurried away, as if anxious to leave her alone with the furtive little man who darted toward her at once. "Listen!" he whispered. "Rod Martin sent me. He's up in the hills, wounded, but he's found your brother and he knows what happened to the stolen stock, too."

"But—if he knew——"

"He just stumbled across it after Lark was killed this afternoon. Followed the trail of Lark's killer and ran into your brother. Got the truth about everything."

"Then why does he send for me?"

"He's wounded, ma'am. I didn't like his looks when I left. Maybe he figures that if you don't get there in a hurry, he won't be alive."

The pain that had been tearing at her during the long hours stopped,

wiped out by sudden fear—the most terrible fear she had ever known. Rod was dying! A vision of him shot into her mind—and she saw him waiting for her, fighting to stay alive until she came. But he couldn't die! Why, that would be death for her, too, even though she went on living.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"Up in the hills. I'll have to take you there or you'll never find it."

"But," her whole body sagged at the realization. "I can't go with you. My father won't let me out of his sight." Then, with sudden, fierce determination: "I'll go! Wait for me half a mile up the northern trail, at the first branch. I'll get out somehow—no matter what happens."

"All right, lady. I'll be waiting."

He left, and her father appeared immediately.

"Was it anything important?"

She looked up at him but she couldn't tell him the message was from Rod.

"Yes." She lied with steady lips. "He brought a message from Lute. He—he's leaving the country and will never come back."

"Then you've been seeing him all this time? All right, Serena—you can go to bed now."

She looked at him with sudden

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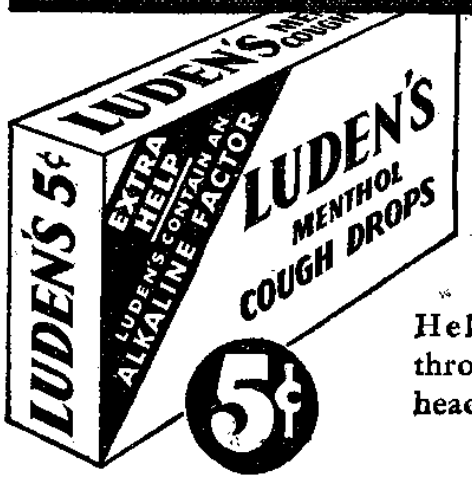

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pleading, but his face remained grim and set. Slowly, she left the room.

IT WAS an hour before Serena dared try the door of her bedroom. The house was dark and quiet, the entire ranch apparently asleep. She turned the doorknob carefully—and then her held-in breath gasped against her lips. The door was open! Her father had either forgotten to lock it or had changed his mind about keeping her a prisoner.

Feeling her way through the darkness, she went downstairs and out to the yard. Saddling swiftly, she swung up and rode for the trail.

As she neared the branch half a mile beyond, a horseman appeared and, as she pulled in, called: "Follow me—fast. The goin'll be pretty rough in spots."

He started north at terrific speed, but she kept up with him, flying through the night without awareness of anything except that Rod Martin might be dying.

Once, as they dipped down from a hillside into a narrow patch of range, she thought she heard following hoofs and stopped. But there was no further sound and she raced on again, after the man who was leading her to Rod.

Then he, too, halted. "Did you hear anythng? Sounded like ponies—plenty of them."

"No. Let's hurry."

A few minutes later he said they would leave their ponies and go the rest of the way afoot. Then, he led her through brush which she could barely see because of the dense gloom.

But again he stopped. "I heard a noise again—and it was hoofs!"

"Nobody could have followed us," Serena argued. "Please hurry!"

They stumbled over the rough ground into a clearing that was like a pocket; a shack door swung open. The man thrust her toward it, pushed her inside.

AS SOON as the shack door slammed behind her, Serena realized that she was trapped. And then she saw Martin, bound to a chair, his face and head bloodstained.

"Rod!" The word was a sob and she started toward him—only to be thrust aside by Dan Cannon.

"What's the matter, Serena? You don't seem to recognize me—or even your old neighbor Vance."

"I recognized both of you!" She faced him as if she were not weak with fear for the man she loved. "And I don't need to be told why I'm here. You made Rod send for me. Now what do you want?"

Cannon laughed. "Take it easy. We don't want anything. Sit down!"

But she whirled past him to Rod Martin. "I'm sorry for what I said this afternoon. I know you couldn't have had anything to do with it."

"Serena." Rod's voice was ragged! "Why did you come here?"

She looked down into his eyes—and again found a world which held no one except themselves.

"Because I love you," she said simply.

An eager light filled Rod's eyes; then died out. "But they'll keep you a prisoner—that's so I won't talk."

Cannon put his hand on the girl's shoulder and pulled her away from Rod. "I'll tell you all about it, Serena—because when you leave here, you'll be willing to do what I say. You see, Vance was ready to do anything to drive your father out of the Skeleton. He wanted it all for himself—sometimes men who are too rich get ideas like that—and since your father wouldn't sell, he took the other way. But he needed help—needed somebody smart enough to wreck the High T without sending him to jail. So he hired me and it cost him more money than my spread makes in five years."

"You're telling me that it was you who rustled the stock and——"

"Well, I wasn't actually there every time, but it's easy enough to hire men who'll carry out orders. Vance turned yellow because your dad put up a fight. He ran away and hired somebody to manage his spread. When I found that out, I sent him word to get back here. But by that time Martin had gotten too smart for his own good."

He stopped and grinned at Bill Vance.

"But why have you got Rod here—and me?" The girl demanded.

"As long as we have you, Martin'll take our orders. Now"—Cannon's grin widened—"Vance, there's another matter I may tell her about—her brother—unless I get enough money to keep still."

VANCE whirled on Cannon, his eyes so wide that rims of white showed around them. "You blackmailer! We agreed on your price and I paid it to you in the beginning. Since then you've demanded more money at every turn of the game."

Cannon chuckled: "Calm down, Bill. Five thousand dollars—or I send the girl back with the truth about her brother. I'll even take your check, if you haven't the cash."

"You—you——" Vance's voice rose to a shrill scream and then a gun flashed into his hand.

"You were the one that killed him after he found the crevasse. I told you not to! He couldn't have proved we'd driven the cattle over——"

Dan Cannon sprang and the gun in Vance's hand roared. Cannon's body seemed to pause in mid air and then it crashed lifelessly.

Rod gathered all of his strength and threw himself and the chair to

which he was bound, onto the floor—*away from the door.*

"Serena," he shouted, "get out—now!"

Bill Vance leaped and carefully leveled his gun. "You won't talk, either, Martin——"

But the door cracked open and at the same second a gun exploded. Vance's arms jerked up and he twisted around before he fell.

In the doorway was Cal Porter, holding a smoking Colt.

"Serena!" He caught the girl in his arms. "I tricked you tonight because I was rotten enough to distrust my own flesh—and I followed you here thinking——"

He broke off, and went on more calmly. "I was right behind you and I've been outside the door listening ever since you got here. Now I'll never stop thanking God that I came, because I know my boy wasn't a killer and a criminal. I hope that if he knows——"

"Don't, dad!" The girl put her *hand over his mouth. "We can't* change what's happened—but now we——"

Her father released her and turned to the door, calling: "Come in, boys."

As half a dozen High T waddies crowded into the room, Serena dropped on her knees beside Rod Martin.

"Untie me," he said. "I can't tell your father you're going to marry me while I'm lying on the floor."

But Serena stopped her father when he started to cut the rawhide cords.

"Not yet," she commanded, smiling so that a dimple showed in one cheek. "I think he just proposed to me, but I want to be sure. You can't free him until he says it again."

"In that case," Rod murmured, "you'll have to kiss me first. I'm not used to proposing twice within five minutes."

Statement of the Ownership, Management, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Romantic Range, published monthly, at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1938.

State of New York, County of New York (*ss.*)

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Send your free book telling how to start a Local Coffee Agency in which a married couple (or a single person) can make up to $60.00 in a week. I will read it and then let you know if I want to accept this opportunity.

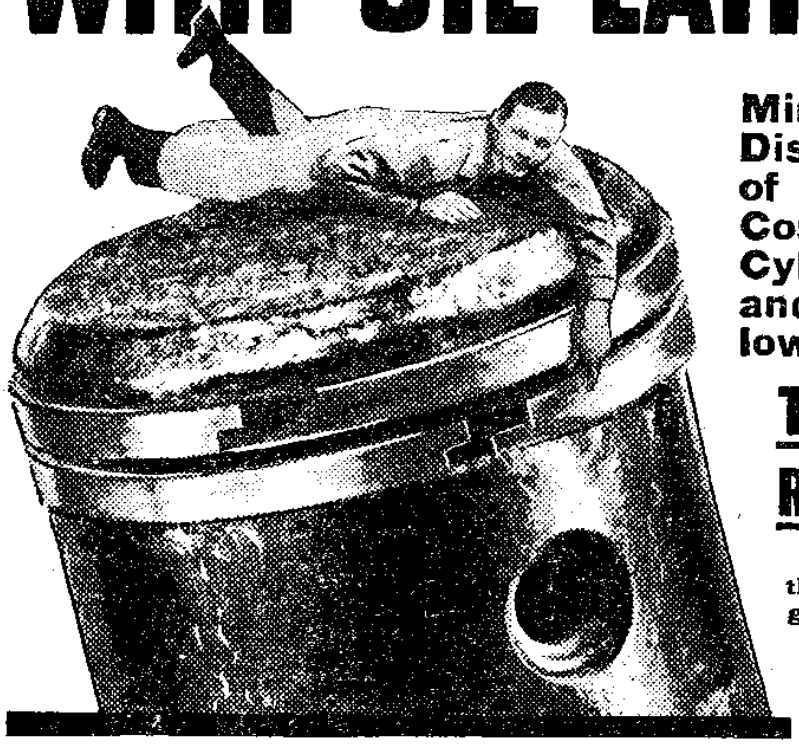
Name .....

Address .....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

Free TO MOTORISTS WITH OIL EATING CARS



Miner's Amazing Mineral Discovery Saves Up to 95% of New Ring and Rebore Costs—If Worn Rings and Cylinders are Wasting Oil and Gas Send Coupon Below for FREE SAMPLE

TAKES PLACE OF NEW RINGS AND REBORE!

Over a half-million motorists have used this revolutionary method of cutting oil and gas waste caused by worn rings and cylinders. Savings up to 50% reported. Give your car new power, pep, speed and quiet with this amazing mineral discovered in the Rocky Mountains. Tested and acclaimed by editors of motor publications.

Quickly placed through spark plug openings and at a fraction of the cost of new rings and rebore, this amazing mineral fills in and plates worn rings and cylinder walls. Ovrhaul gives your motor increased compression. Cuts oil consumption, increases gas mileage, adds new power and speed, with other substantial benefits of new rings and rebore. Ovrhaul has been thoroughly tested and proved by impartial laboratories and great Universities in the United States and abroad. Proved harmless to finest motors.

WHY PAY UP TO $151.37 For New Rings and Reboring?

If worn rings and cylinders cause your car to be an oil and gas eater—before you spend a lot of money, try Ovrhaul. Give it an opportunity to do for you what it has done for thousands of others. Here are costs of new rings and rebore on a few 1935 models:

Make	Cost of New Rings and Rebore	Time of Car Tie-up
Chevrolet	$50.00	2 days
De Soto	62.50	2 days
Dodge	69.20	2 days
Ford	$50 to 55.00	2 days
Buick	80.00	2½ days
Cadillac	151.37	2 days

ENDORSED
By Member of
Society Automotive Engineers
National Aeronautical Assn.
Detroit Soc. of Engineering
Pontiac Engineers Club

Let us send you L. H. Smith's complete report which shows that the compression of a badly worn 6-cylinder motor was increased 32.4% and brought back to within .09 points of its original new car efficiency. Such tests conclusively prove the sensational merits of Ovrhaul.

INSTALLED IN 30 MINUTES!

Ovrhaul works on the mineral plating principle—No special tools needed. No car tie-up. No danger of ruining motor by grinding cylinder walls—works in while you drive—saves you time and money. Gives you months of extra car use. A single application lasts up to 10,000 miles.

MONEY-MAKING TERRITORIES OPEN

For Salesmen and Distributors Who Act Quick!

Sales of Ovrhaul have been phenomenal. Hundreds of Salesmen and Distributors in the United States and abroad. Biggest money-maker in years. Advertising in Saturday Evening Post and 150 other national magazines carry the astounding message of Ovrhaul. The market has barely been scratched. To wide-awake men we offer opportunity—an opportunity which may never come your way again. A fast selling, repeating article, fully protected by U. S. and foreign patents. Saves motorists millions of dollars, ***Ovrhaul Sells for Less Than Spark Plugs.*** Exclusive territories still open—but you must act quick if you want in on this.

Phone, Write or Wire TODAY!

Let us send you free sample which every salesman is furnished for demonstration. Let us show you, with their permission, ACTUAL earnings of our distributors. Let us show you how you can start in this business NOW—before all territories are assigned. The market is there—we have the product—are you the man? Let's find out. Write, phone or wire today.

B. L. Mellinger, Pres., OVRHAUL CO., N-918, Los Angeles, Calif.

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY!

SAMPLE FREE!

If your car is wasting oil and gas, before you spend up to $151.37 for new rings and rebore—send your name and address on the coupon below for a free sample of this amazing mineral which expands up to 30 times when heated and full details of a real money-making opportunity. ***Air mail reaches us overnight.***

Free SAMPLE COUPON

B. L. Mellinger, Pres., Ovrhaul Co., N-918, Los Angeles, Calif. *(Paste on Postcard and mail)*
Without cost or obligation, rush me FREE SAMPLE. Also show me your big money-making plan.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

Name and Year of Car.....